

AN ACRE OF GREEN GRASS

A REVIEW OF MODERN
BENGALI LITERATURE

BUDDHADEVA BOSE

papyrus 2 GANENDRA MITRA LANE
CALCUTTA 700 004 * INDIA

Published 1948

Proofs read by Subimal Lahiri

Published by Arijit Kumar for PAPHYRUS, 2 Ganendra Mitra Lane, Calcutta 4
Printed by Sibnath Paul, at PRINTECH, 2 Ganendra Mitra Lane, Calcutta 4
Bound by Dinesh Biswas, Biswas & Co., 19/1E, Patwarbagan Lane, Calcutta 9

To the Readers

With no introduction, but only a note on the names mentioned and a few short paragraphs of acknowledgements, this distinguished slim volume was launched shortly after World War II. This was the first of the only two books Buddhadeva Bose wrote in English. The subtitle calls it 'A Review of Modern Bengali Literature'—a review, not a history. The title is explained by the first two lines of Yeats's poem of that name which the author expected his readers to recall :

*Picture and book remain,
An acre of green grass ...*

This proud assertion of the intrinsic value of art was also characteristic of the Bengali author who considered it necessary to take a firm public stand about it at a time when literary values in this part of the world seemed rapidly to be taking some disquieting turn. The last section of the book's first chapter made this position clear : 'Today, Bengal is much like Yeats's Ireland. The poet's occupation is no longer thought natural; he is fallen on the thorns of political cacophony. .. Spontaneity is gone; simplicity and innocence are lost; nothing remains for us but hard work, the discipline of self-conscious and incorruptible pride in the role of the poet.' Things, I hope, have changed since then, but vigilance is always wholesome.

Behind the review of modern Bengali literature presented here lies this very distinct and uncompromising critical point of view. Holding a view like this in the late forties of our century, Buddhadeva Bose had knowingly invited the wrath of the new guardians of taste. Unperturbed, he stuck to his point, and it took him more than a decade before he gained any attentive hearing. This book is, therefore, both a review of the twentieth century Bengali literature and an introduction to the author himself as a creative writer.

It is necessary to stress this point. The first four chapters of the book are devoted to four major figures of the period under consideration. Modern Bengali drama, as it then existed, has not been touched for obvious reasons. The last two extensive chapters then

discuss the achievement of Bengali prose and poetry available before 1948. In doing this, the author has been scrupulously fair to everyone except himself. Nowhere is an indication that the reviewer himself was also an important figure of the period, in fact more important than most of the authors so lovingly eulogized. His own name occurs as a footnote to the account. This exemplary modesty may be called a serious flaw of the book. But the values he cherished as a creative writer, which generated some distinctive greenness along the acre of his choice, are difficult to miss in these pages.

The first and only edition of the book sold out three decades ago. Demand was for a similar book in Bengali. But a lean creative period, when this book in English was actually conceived, was followed soon by a renewed creative activity, and the author refused even to permit a reprint. It needed, he maintained, very extensive revisions to bring it up to date and to reflect his later views on the subject. Adequate time for such work was no longer available. The present reprint, is now being released because of the outstanding value of the book even as it stands. For the author's more comprehensive views on the translations from Rabindranath, one has to look up the concluding article of *Kavi Rabindranath*, in Bengali.

A NOTE ON NAMES

I HAVE not attempted either consistency or accuracy in the transliteration of Bengali names. Wherever my knowledge has permitted, I have spelt a name as its possessor does (or did), and, as for the rest, tried to approximate the original. English conventions, however, have been partly retained, notably *s* for *sh*. The dental *s*, abounding in Bengali spelling, is not (unless immediately followed by certain consonants) phonetically distinguished from the palatal *sh*, and Samar Sen is really *Shamar Shen*, and *Sadhana Shadhana*. In these cases, there is, at least, the support of Sanskrit phonetics, but our transcription of even the orthographical *sh* as simply *s*, Santiniketan for *Shantiniketan*, or Saratchandra for *Sharatchandra*, is entirely a concession to English inclinations. Conversely, Bengalis have an obstinate habit pronouncing the palatal *sh* as *s* when immediately followed by an *r*, so that Sanskrit *ashrama* becomes *asram* in Bengali, and *shravana*, the name of our rainiest month, becomes *sravan*.

Certain Bengali surnames are notoriously difficult to transliterate. Neither Datta nor Dutt, neither Ray or Roy, approximates the respective original : and these differently spelt pairs should be considered the same.

The frequent recurrence of surnames must not lead any reader to imagine that Bengali authorship is restricted to family guilds, for, contrary to English surnames, ours are limited to a small and static number. We refer to persons by their first names, and to notables simply by those names, a habit I have throughout maintained in this book, and so far persisted in as to refer to living European authors without the customary titles. Apart from this being the courtesy of my country, I feel that a distinguished name suffices by itself, and to add a 'Mr.' to it is superfluous if not unseemly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN this book, I have used or absorbed some material previously published in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, *India Speaks*, *India* and *Current Thought*, whose Editors I take this opportunity of thanking.

My thanks are due to the Publishing Department of Visva-Bharati for kind permission to quote and translate from the Bengali works and one letter of Rabindranath Tagore ; to Messers Macmillan & Co., Ltd., and Mr Rathindranath Tagore for their kindly allowing me to quote from the English *Gitanjali* ; and to the management of the *Times* for their kindness in agreeing to my quoting translated lines of Mr Samar Sen from the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

I also wish to thank Dr Amiya Chakravarty and Mr Jibananda Das for kindly permitting me to translate from their poems, and Mr Pulinbehari Sen for his kindness in helping me with certain facts concerning Pramatha Chaudhuri.

I have profited by the conversation of some ; and am indebted to Mr Atulchandra Gupta for one or two historical points.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

RABINDRANATH 1

CHAPTER TWO

PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI 26

CHAPTER THREE

SARATCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY 39

CHAPTER FOUR

NAZRUL ISLAM 48

CHAPTER FIVE

MODERN BENGALI POETRY 55

CHAPTER SIX

MODERN BENGALI PROSE 70

CHAPTER ONE

RABINDRANATH

RABINDRANATH TAGORE is a phenomenon. If Nature, manifest in the even light of the sun, forsook the forms of fields and hills and trees, and flowered in words, that, indeed, were he. There has not been a greater literary force, or a greater force, a force like Nature's, expressing itself in literature.

This sounds fantastic, but is true. I do not mean that he is the greatest writer or poet in my experience, or even the greatest modern. If I had not read Shakespeare, I would not have known to what extreme heights (and depths) the spirit of man can travel. If I had not read Yeats, I would have been left with only an imperfect notion of the capacity of the lyric : knowing him, I have known the uttermost meaning that a poem of twenty words may contain. What I am thinking of as Rabindranath's unique merit is his quantity, his immense range, his fabulous variety. It would be trite to call him versatile ; to call him prolific very nearly funny. The point is not that his writings run into a hundred thousand pages of print, covering every form and aspect of literature, though this matters : he is a source, a waterfall, flowing out in a hundred streams, a hundred rhythms, incessantly. Yet in his boyhood or youth he displayed no prodigious talents, no revolutionary fire ; he obeyed conventions and followed his elders ; he was rather slow, rather dim and timid. If he had died at Keats's age, he would have been a minor poet of the anthologies, taking his turn with twenty others ; at Shelley's, a fascinating figure whom poets and scholars would be constantly 'discovering' ; if his life had closed at fifty, or seventy even, he would not have meant to us as much as he does. His death, at eighty, has been premature, for he was still changing, still growing. Throughout his life, he has grown like some great tree, slowly, imperceptibly, with gentle passivity. A tree meant to live for centuries ; tangled, interwoven, deep-rooted, drinking the life of the earth and the sun ; complicated

in details but totally simple. Destiny had planned his life well : unlike Wordsworth, or even Browning or Tennyson, he grew greater with each furrow on his face : it was necessary for him, as for Yeats, to live long. If Yeats had not lived to be seventy-five, or Rabindranath to be eighty, some of the most beautiful poetry of our epoch would have remained unwritten, and two of its greatest poets unfulfilled.

Rabindranath is our Chaucer and Shakespeare, our Dryden, and our equivalent of the English translators of the Bible. To describe him in terms of English literature, one must name quite a number of authors, for he compresses in one man's lifetime the development of several centuries. He has created language, both prose and verse. The range of his verse technique will carry us from Wyatt and Surrey, across Spenser, Marlowe, Dryden, Shelley and Swinburne, right up to the early Ezra Pound. He is possessed by the lyric ; but among his momentous works are narrative verse and verse dramas ; his ballads excel Scott's ; his child poems, more abundant than Blake's, blend Blake's innocence with an almost sophisticated humour. Sly, shy, like Chaucer's, this humour runs through his work in an arterial flow ; this and his great lyric gift are the two moulders of his prose. His extent to development in prose is even greater than in verse : from Bankimchandra's stiff formalism to the diamond depths of Rabindranath's later prose—the way is so long and so hard that we never cease to marvel he could traverse it all. In the last phase, his verse became like prose, not in Byron's sense, but T. S. Eliot's ; and his prose became the same as poetry. He is the only instance where the greatest poet of a country is thought by some greater in prose. He has brought us the short story when it was hardly known in England, and introduced the psychological novel ; his two prose comedies, early-Shakespearean in temper, are yet without a third ; his criticism is profuse and fundamental, his satire occasional and brilliant. His sermons are prose poems, his controversy is Marvell's garden where we must tread on flowers ; his travel-diaries are rich in both observation and contemplation. He has created a new form of the prose play ; has written on philosophy, education, politics,

science ; on prosody, music and the peasantry ; on every question of the day. Among his best works are his autobiographies and certain collections of letters ; he is the author of the best Bengali Primer. This list is long, but not without omissions. He has done all, all that can be done with the written word. And all these are parts of, and contribute to, an inner harmony which his variety or his abundance never disturbs. His verse and prose, his fiction, drama and song, his poetry and his humour are mutually linked and dependent ; one is beautiful with the other's aid ; his greatness is the greatness of the whole. In many of these different branches, perhaps, and certainly in some, others have surpassed him ; but he has no equal in this immense process of ramification and unification, this vastness, this vast completeness. Rabindranath is the world's most complete writer.

II

I am aware that all this may seem confusing to those readers of the East and West who know him by the English *Gitanjali*. *Gitanjali* has been rightly praised by the world : it is the quintessence of Rabindranath and a miracle of translation. The miracle is not that so much has survived ; but the poems are re-born in the process, the flowers bloom anew on a foreign soil. Denuded of the sensuous metrical arrangements of the original and the more than Swinburnian rhymes, they are more quiet in the English, more docile, the surrender more utter. The *Song Offerings* are more of song in the original and more of an offering in the English. We in Bengal find in the English a strange freshness, a beauty not as ours ; we, who are steeped in the Bengali, are newly moved by certain passages, as if the original did not exist. There are moments when the translation surpasses the original, such as the passage Ezra Pound thought 'like some pure Hellenic' :

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing
the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

In Bengali this is :

Séthā usā dān hātē dhari śrāvāṇa-thālā
Niyē āśē ekkhāni mādhyer mālā
Nirabe parāyē ditē dharār lālātē.

I shall attempt a literal translation to show the difference :

There dawn, holding a golden plate in her right hand, brings a garland of sweetness, silently to place it on the forehead of the earth.

The advantages of the English are obvious. 'Basket' is a better visual image than the 'garland on the plate' of Hindu ritual ; 'right hand' sounds better than 'dān hāt', and the compression of the English is admirable. The original is loose-knit, weakened by 'poetic diction' ; it has never struck a Bengali reader as remarkable.

There is another, a converse, and a more severe test. I have felt that 'minor' poems translate well ; but great poetry is obstinate. One of the great lines quoted by Arnold, Dante's 'in His will lies our peace', does not, in the English, correspond to Arnold's estimation of it. A good many pages of the *Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* are dull. We have not yet in Bengali (a sorry thing to say) any adequate translation of Kalidasa ; and Satyendranath Datta, one of our ablest craftsmen in verse, himself turned 'The Indian Serenade' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' into childish babble. We have, however, very good translations from Heine, Hugo, Stevenson, D. H. Lawrence, from Noguchi and the Chinese Anthology. Our poet-translators have persuaded even the difficult Eliot, but discreetly left alone the crystal clearness of Yeats. It is said that Sister Nivedita tried for three days to translate a single line from Rabindranath—'Niśidin bharsā rākhis, oré mon habéi habé'—and gave up the job in despair ; that similar despair came to Rabindranath with Chandidasa's famous line—'Chalé nīl śāḍī niṅḡāḍi niṅḡāḍi parāṇa sahita mor'.* How, then,

* Fairness, I feel, demands that I should, even at the risk of appearing foolhardy, try to tell at least what the lines are about. 'Have hope, O my heart, hope day and night, for it will be, it will be', says Rabindranath, and Chandidasa complains that the maiden, still wet from the river, 'wings, as she walks, her blue sari, and wrings my heart with it.' If the reader is disappointed, it is just as it should be.

did it go with his own great lines ? A poem we all think one of his most beautiful, how has it fared in English ?

Āji śrāvāṇa-ghana gahana-mohé
Gopana taba charaṇa phé.é,
Niśār mato nīrab, ohé,
Sabār diṅhi eḍāyē élé.
Pra'hāt āji mudéḥhē āṅkhi,
Bātās tytā jāteḥhē dāki,
Nilāj nil ākāt dhāki
Nibīḍ meḡh ké dilo mélé.

Kuñjahīn kānanabhūmi
Duār deoyā sakal gharé,
Ekélā kon pathik tumi
Pathikhīn pathér paré.
Hé ekā sakhā, hé priyatama,
Royéḥhē kholā é ghar mama,
Samukh diyé svapana-sana
Jéyo na moré helāy jhélé.

A little poem of two stanzas, four parts, corresponding to the four divisions of our music ; haunting in metre, rhyme and alliteration ; a perfect lyric. We should have thought it untranslatable, like Shakespeare's songs ; but here is the English :

In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest,
 silent as night, eluding all watchers.

Today the morning has closed its eye's heedless of the insistent calls of
 the loud east wind, and a thick veil has been drawn over the ever-wakeful
 blue sky.

The woodlands have hushed their songs, and doors are all shut at every
 house. Thou art the solitary wayfarer in this deserted street. Oh my only
 friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house — do not pass
 by like a dream.

The translation is almost literal. Only, 'śrāvāṇa-ghana gahana-mohé' — 'in the deep dark enchantment of July' — is suitably simplified ; 'the futile calls of the wind' becomes 'the insistent calls of the loud east wind', the 'immodest blue sky' becomes 'ever-wakeful' (for the associations of our 'modesty' — 'lajjā' — can be conveyed by no English word) ; and the 'spreading heavy clouds' change to 'a thick veil', for 'cloud' begets quite different images in Bengali

and England. (Which poet, thinking of the magnificent rain of a Bengal July, would write 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' or even 'I bring fresh showers for thirsting flowers' !) Deviations from the original are small, as if the poem never suffered the grill of translation, but came straight from the poet's heart. My mind hums with the Bengali, and yet, as I copy out the English words, I tremble to their subtler rhythm. *Gitanjali* is more than a great work in English ; it is the work of a great English poet.

III

Rabindranath, when he started translating from his own work to beguile a convalescence, had published at least fifty volumes in verse and prose. Was it by accident or design that he chose the poems he did ? Did he review his entire work before making up his mind, or was he simply guided by the fact that those songs were then his latest ? We have no means to ascertain. The choice was far from easy, but, whether deliberate or haphazard, wise. The *Gitanjali* group of poems are such as would translate beautifully or not at all. (It was a little song of the same kind that defeated the brave Nivedita.) Being, in the main, songs, they are short, simple and as much disembodied as written words can be. The language is plain ; the terms universal ; nothing 'local' stands in the way. These, if one can judge by the translations themselves, are also the qualities of the classical poetry of China ; at any rate, it seems more fresh, more free in translation than the poetry of any other country. *Gitanjali*, over and above these intrinsic advantages, had the great and rare luck of the translator's being the author himself, an author who had already worked in words for well over thirty years. It was destined to a miraculous transformation.

Similar felicity attended *The Crescent Moon*, *The Post Office* and one or two others. After a time, however, the translations did not seem to go so well. Perhaps, in the poems, the lack of metre, of technical variety, began to tell at last ; I think the situa-

tion was somewhat like Whitman's, where the sameness of the prose rhythm makes the poems look repetitive. And his prose fiction definitely palled. The anti-climax to Yeats's Introduction came from E. M. Forster who, with a somewhat youthful iconoclasm, summed up *The Home and the World* as 'a boarding-house flirtation that masks itself in mystic or patriotic talk', Sandip 'a West Kensingtonian Babu', 'amorous and amoral', and the action leading 'to the death of another Babu, who was chivalrous and young'. Finally, Forster found in the book a 'strain of vulgarity'; and we rather wonder whether, while writing this review, he had allowed himself to be infected.

But we should not be as hasty in blaming Forster as he was in his remarks. Rabindranath's fiction suffers terribly in English. He did not translate himself, and there were no Garnetts for him. Selection was often wrong. In particular, it is hard to conceive *Ghare-Bāire* attractive in English, and *The Home and the World*, such as it is, need not have appeared. It is luxuriant even in Bengali and even for Rabindranath. It has 'that lusciousness, that overprofusion' of 'South Oriental work' from which Pound was happy to find *Gitanjali* free. Bengali can bear this to a great extent; a little of it will suffocate English. We have to remember that Rabindranath is the most metaphorical writer in a highly metaphorical language. He thinks in metaphors: he argues in similes. Bengali is partial to this habit of thought: but English, in spite of Shelley and Swinburne, is different; it is a level language, moving in logical sequence: *Gitanjali* itself had to be modified and modulated to suit its character. Rabindranath's fiction, needing much more of this 'treatment', has been left untended. We hold him great in fiction, specially the short story, and a certain quantity of it, properly presented, could make friends everywhere in the world. But wrong books, wrongly served, have eclipsed him.

Edward Thompson, so far the only reliable European writer on Bengali literature, was, in his last years, sadly conscious of Rabindranath's decline in the West. In a letter quoted by William Rothenstein in his autobiography, Thompson, melancholy and apologetic, tries to explain the situation: 'Tagore has been un-

lucky in this—so far as the *English* influence on his work goes he belongs to the Tennysonian age, but he has the misfortune to come up for judgment by the age of T. S. Eliot and Aldous Hux'ey. He won't get justice now—nothing could get him justice.... A literature in which every poet was like T. S. Eliot and every novelist like E. M. Forster would be fairly arid. We do need less narrow canons of criticism.' Thompson's words are not as well chosen as well meaning. A writer of one age *must* come up for judgment by another, and take his chance with the changes in the literary atmosphere. Shakespeare must be judged by Dryden, Donne by Johnson, Swinburne by Eliot. And it is good, indeed necessary, that it is so ; for the criticism of each age is a kind of renewal for old authors. We do not look upon a writer as belonging to a single age, and that his own ; he must have something valid for all times, if he is valid at all. There is a certain unavoidable repulsion for our immediate predecessors ; our ancestors are more interesting than our parents, two centuries easier to cross than fifty years. The aversion to Rabindranath which, at the moment, we notice also in Bengal, is merely a symptom of the times. But the times flow incessantly, and Time never stops, so that a symptom will begin to disappear almost as soon as we discern it. Thompson's 'age of Eliot and Huxley' is already a thing of the past ; he was thinking of *The Waste Land* and perhaps *Antic Hay*, whereas now we are faced with *Four Quartets* and *The Perennial Philosophy*. The time seems to be approaching when Rabindranath will finally take his place in the literature of the world. He will certainly begin to be re-read ; possibly he will be translated anew. Perhaps he will meet his Garnetts, after all.

IV

Rabindranath cannot be appraised except in the whole. To see him as he is all he is and means, his great range, his unequalled variety ; one must read at least one prose comedy, one verse drama, certain essays and travel-books, two or three symbolical plays, some.

twenty tales and short novels and five hundred poems or so. I say this with an eye on those who cannot read him except in translation, and hope this introduction will stimulate some of them to learn his tongue so as to read him in the original, more of him and more in him.

The selection, to be only barely representative, should include much that has not yet appeared in English, or appeared in a defective form. As Shakespeare cannot be measured only by *As You Like It*, or *Hamlet*, or the Sonnets, though his essence is in all three, so Rabindranath cannot be gauged only by *Gitanjali* or *The Post Office* or *The Religion of Man*. He can be judged by these, or any of these, for in India we say that the drop contains the ocean ; judged, but not gauged. In Bengal we have no special place for *Gītāñjali* ; to us it is in no sense his best or most significant work ; it is a great book, one of his great books, one of the fifty, perhaps, we are for ever reading. We hold our breath as we follow his amazing development ; book after book, at times five or six in a year, each distinct from its predecessor, new in form and content. One manner, one mood, one kind of music has not held him long ; none of his successes has enthralled him ; he has been outgrowing himself every day of his life. Repetition there must be in one whose quantity is so vast, repetition on the surface and down in the depths ; he turns a story to a play, a verse tale to a dance drama ; he writes the same story twice, the same poem in verse and in prose, composes the same song four or five times, and these at uncertain intervals, now of hours, now of years. But 'same' is hardly the word here, for each repetition is a revision, and each revision a rebirth, for each wears a new beauty. He has repeated himself as all great writers do, realizing a vision in work after work, revealing what Henry James called 'the figure in the carpet', a pattern of continuous thought already existing in the mind, but not seen till the end. We say about him what in the 'Tajmahal' poem he says of Shah Jahan : ever he left behind his deeds, being greater than all of them. The cry of *Balākā*, the 'lightning cry' of 'storm-drunk' wings in dark deodar forests, that, really, is the cry of his own soul :

Héthā nay, héthā nay, anyā kothā, anyā konkhānē.

Not here, not here, but elsewhere, somewhere else.*

V

Europe has seen him in *Gitanjali* : a mystic, almost a saint. The entire non-Bengali world shares this view, and even a certain section of Bengal. 'He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live', says Yeats's Bengali doctor. This is very possibly true, but ultimately misleading, for our conception of a saint is different from that of Christendom. I am not sure that this reputation has served our poet well. It has diverted attention from his 'professional' excellence in literature to his 'amateur' interest in philosophy—I hope the two words will offend none. Many of the books on him, both in Bengali and English, seek to show his connection with Bergson, the Upanishads and our medieval saints rather than to present him as a writer. This, indeed, is the source of the dangerous and persistent rumour that he is always talking about 'God and all that'. It is true he is godly, not, however, in Yeats's sense of 'godly and grave', but simply in the sense of good. We who speak his language go to him for his sweet warmth, for that harmony in which power becomes peace, the peace and power of the sun after whom he is so rightly named. His benediction is our life : he teaches us speech and song, love and courtesy. *Gitanjali* does not suffice us : we must have his songs of the seasons, of youth and love, his orchestral odes, and those dramatic poems where, recreating our epics, he brings us a new, a more Western humanism. He it is who has made the rich red blood of young Europe flow through the veins of our literature, through our life and thought, and our ancient strifeless world. It is owing to him that we feel quite at home in Western literature, as if Bengal were no other than a part of Europe. He has made us, for the first time since our classical age, citizens of the world. Historically, he is our Elizabethan Renaissance rather than our Romantic storm or

* Translation mine.

Tennysonian calm ; he discovers Europe for us and becomes, in the process, Pound's 'new Greece'. In comedies he is a sophisticated man of the world ; in stories, of a tenderness so pure that it melts into humour ; in song an Ariel, more ethereal than Shakespeare's, and a Prospero in intellect, a Prospero inspired not by any revenge, but by the desire to serve. This Elizabethan multiplicity is unified by what we must call, in the deepest sense, his inherent religious feeling. He 'knows life' ; in truth, he knows it well enough to know that knowledge is useless, and writes plays like *The Post Office* where, instead of the definite and limited world of realistic drama, we have the eternal flow. He is learned, so learned that his learning never shows, and in his essays and criticism, thought and feeling become one and the same. The work of his very last phase, of the last two years of his life, is again a new beginning ; he calls the first of this series *Navajātak*, 'The New Born'—having exhausted such titles as *The End*, *Postscript*, *The Last Septet*—a new beginning ending in the old man's endless humility Eliot speaks of. And to have him, we must have all these, not the one or the other, not the earlier or the later sequence, but all, but all.

The only defect Pound notices in him is that his poetry is 'pious'. This is natural, for in Europe poetry and religion separated long ago ; since the Renaissance mystical writing has had no place in accredited literature. In India, this divorce has taken place only recently ; it is still a common notion with us that the poet is a religious man ; and to us Rabindranath's 'piety' is, by itself, nothing remarkable, deserving neither praise nor blame. The Vaishnavas and our medieval mystics are still sung throughout the country ; and to this day God is not only a hackneyed subject in our literature, it is a subject so natural that we are neither amused nor shocked, nor pleased by the fact of its presence. We take it for granted, and then look for the poetry. A certain amount (a small amount in proportion to the whole) of Rabindranath's poetry is truly mystical ; he is the greatest religious poet in a country where, for centuries, all great poets have been religious ; but he is much more than that, much else, for he gives us both heaven and

earth, or heaven in earth. The usual order is reversed in him; the older he grows, the more 'secular' he becomes. He writes in old age some of his most passionate love songs, love poems, love stories; he writes of the Santhal maiden working to build his clay cottage* and the lover she will meet as soon as the day's work is done, and of the low-born girl, riding a pony like a gipsy and followed by village dogs. His love overflows; his pity is abounding; we live in him the whole of our life. 'Sweet is this earth, and sweet the dust of the earth,'† is his message at parting. Yet he is not sad to leave it; he is prepared for the journey, waiting for the boat without impatience. 'And because I love this life,' had he not said long ago, 'I know I shall love death as well.'

Heaven and earth he has, both life and death, but no death-in-life, no purgatory, no hell. This, if anything, this is what we miss in him, we who know the literature of the West. His vision comprehends suffering, earthly coils and earthly toils, jealousy, despair, greed, but not Eliot's 'horror and boredom'. Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Eliot himself reach out to worlds which Rabindranath never writes about, though he seems to glimpse them in his strange, at times weird paintings.... But at least he is like Shakespeare in this that he seems never to have experienced boredom.

VI

Bengal has changed much since Yeats heard, 'perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream.' He was happy to discover a land where writing poetry did not seem 'strange, unnatural, or in need of defence.' 'In my own country,' he said, 'four-fifths of our energy is spent in the quarrel with bad taste.' What he admired most in Rabindranath was his spontaneity; a simplicity and an innocence which, after Blake, had faded from English writing, and Yeats himself was out to recapture. Today,

* The reference is to *Sydmaili*, the clay cottage where the Poet, in his last years, lived for some time.

† Translation mine.

Bengal is much like Yeats's Ireland. The poet's occupation is no longer thought natural; he is fallen on the thorns of political cacophony. We have to fight not only bad taste, but also parrot-politics, of this colour and other, demanding that art must serve their ends. We have to waste our time in propaganda so that propaganda may not enlist the whole of literature. Spontaneity is gone; simplicity and innocence are lost, nothing remains for us but hard work, the discipline of self-consciousness, and an incorruptible pride in the role of the poet.

CHAPTER TWO

PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI

PRAMATHA CHAUDHURI, in his seventies, said goodbye to Mayfair and all that, and a visitor to Santiniketan, while straying in the Uttarayan grounds, could have caught a glimpse of him in one of the lovely little houses designed and built for Rabiindranath. If the visitor was intrepid, or curious, or a lover of literature, he would perhaps have walked in and for a few moments sat face to face with one of the master-artificers of Bengali prose. Sharp eyes, a dagger-like nose, a clean-shaven handsome face wreathed with wrinkles, a splendid body of a man shattered by illness, looking for all the world like a great mountain eagle, wounded in combat, wings broken, alone. As the long trembling fingers reached out for the golden cigarette-case lying on a little table amid books and cups and things, the bright eyes, pouncing on the visitor, lingering, questioning, would so unnerve him that he would forget to strike a light for the cigarette and begin to think of taking his leave. If he was lucky, however, Indira Devi Chaudhurani would appear at the right moment and immediately start the right sort of conversation. A niece of Rabindranath's, herself gifted in music and *belles-lettres*, tall, ivory-complexioned, splendid in an old-world way, she was the lesser known half, and is now the only half, of Bengal's most distinguished couple. The eagle, if alone in his last days, was not companionless.

Despite his two-fold connection with Rabindranath, personal and literary, Pramatha Chaudhuri had never lived in Santiniketan before, nor had he been a frequent and interested visitor. This, I think, is significant, for Pramatha Chaudhuri was the most urban writer of his time, and that in the best sense of the word. No *āśram*, however leafy and serene, could ever have been his Land of Heart's Desire. His choice of pseudonym meant much, for in adopting the name of Birbal, Akbar's Hindu wit, he not only made an already famous name more famous, but affirmed his own

affinities. Indeed, he was born to the role of a courtier, and would happily have shone a jewel in the crown of either Vikramaditya or Akbar. Krishnanagar, where his boyhood was spent, stimulated his congenital courtliness. Once the capital of Bengal, the seat of the great art-patron Maharaja Krishnachandra, whom his protégé, Bharatchandra, the poet, has made memorable in our literary history, Krishnanagar still retains (or retained till half-a-century ago) a tradition of court culture, of fragrant indolence and witty repartees. True, it is a decadent tradition, out of place in the context of modern life, and perhaps it is to be counted among the casualties of the Second World War. But there was still some life in it when Pramatha Chaudhuri was young, and it instilled in him a love for the delicacies of life, including classical music and the *bon mot*. His lifelong admiration for Bharatchandra is an indication of his mental climate—Bharatchandra, the typical court poet, a master of the craft of verse, and not at all the sort of poet whom Rabindranath could care for. The inter-relation of Rabindranath and Pramatha Chaudhuri is a fascinating subject : when they first met, the former was still young and the latter very much so, but mature enough to recognize the older man as ‘surpassingly great’. His elder brother, who had married another of the Poet’s nieces, was one of the earliest lovers of Rabindranath’s poetry, and the young Pramatha was often a passive listener, and sometimes an eavesdropper, to the brilliant conversation that flowered in the elders’ circle. Time only strengthened the impression of that first acquaintance ; a more devoted friend Rabindranath had never had. A friend, yes ; an admirer, certainly ; but not a disciple. In Rabindranath, Pramatha Chaudhuri saw a genius, a greater master, but not The Master. In spite of the closest association which terminated only with Rabindranath’s death, in spite of long years of literary comradeship, Pramatha Chaudhuri never came directly under Rabindranath’s influence, either in his work or in his life. This is remarkable, but not strange. Herein we discern not only Pramatha Chaudhuri’s great integrity, but also his natural lack of sympathy for the type of mind Rabindranath embodies. There is nothing in him of that parching nostalgia which is the ultimate source of

most lyrical and all mystical poetry; he is perfectly at home in this world ; his fulfilment is here and nowhere else, whereas Rabindranath's cry has ever been 'Elsewhere !' In fact, Rabindranath and Pramatha Chaudhuri represent two altogether different worlds : one, the winding stair of imagination panting up to the starry tower ; the other, the comfortable well-lit drawing-room of the intellect. Rabindranath is ever drunk with dreams ; Pramatha Chaudhuri is incorrigibly sober. Yet Rabindranath, with his all-absorbing mind found in his younger colleague a model of excellence and even an inspiration. This, certainly, is a singular distinction for Pramatha Chaudhuri, for he alone of Rabindranath's juniors influenced the poet without being influenced by him. One feels that Pramatha Chaudhuri is an alien in Rabindranath's world, whereas Rabindranath has free access to the Pramathean drawing-room : he visits, dines and lingers, but does not *stay*. The perfect guest he, and Pramatha the perfect host. This guest-host relationship culminated in *Sabujpatra*, whose unstinted hospitality Rabindranath honoured in princely fashion. The green leaf* faded, the lights in the drawing-room grew dim, the Guest, gratified and grateful, departed. But to the last day, his respect for Pramatha Chaudhuri's intellect remained undiminished.

II

After taking his Master of Arts degree at Calcutta University, Pramatha Chaudhuri spent a few years in England. He returned as a barrister, but never practised. Professionalism he shunned, either in law or literature. Private means, ample at that time, formed the necessary background to his life as a man-of-leisure-and-letters. He built up a gorgeous library ; he read, he smoked ; he thought, he talked. Steeped in French literature, knee-deep in Sanskrit, as much at home in English as in his own language, far and near he fared with zest and discernment, drinking at many springs, gleaning the

* *Sabujpatra* : lit., Green Leaf.

harvests of centuries and countries. His house at 20 Mayfair, Ballygunge was an intellectual centre ; Rabindranath came there often, and C. F. Andrews, and other celebrities of the day. He studied art and music, history and philosophy, the geography of India and the Tenancy Act of Bengal. Politics he liked, polemics he loved ; he was interested in sports, ghosts and gossip. Those who matter at once felt that a rare spirit had come to our literature. To those who do not, he was unknown.

Fame came on the trail of *Sabujpatra*, which he founded and edited and burnt a lot of money on. This monthly magazine started as a revolt and soon became an institution. Its name and its green cover suggested that spirit of youth which emanated from its pages. Gloriously insouciant, it discouraged both circulation and stability by every possible means : it never printed an advertisement, appeared at wilful intervals, reproduced no drawings or water-colours, and published whatever the editor liked and as he liked it. Canons were flouted, conventions defied ; there were no 'features' or eye-catchers ; no gadgets or trinkets. The editor and Rabindranath filled more than half the pages and there was once an issue containing, cover to cover, Rabindranath's song drama *Phalguni* ('Spring'), the whole of it, and *nothing* else. This is the only instance I have known, or heard of, of a magazine coming out with only one 'article' in it. Of course *Sabujpatra* did not live long, it was not meant to. A second series appeared after an interval of some years : the flood rose for a second time, flagged, ebbed, and stopped.

In Bengal we think *Sabujpatra* unique, and are apt to forget it was like Rabindranath's *Sadhana* in many ways. *Sadhana*, too, with its stubborn chastity, was eminently unsaleable. In those pre-Santiniketan days, when Rabindranath lived in a house-boat on the Padma, alone with his dreams, his prodigious quantities of verse and prose were flung down the corridor of a magazine before they emerged into the great world in final book form. It had to be so ; that magazine was his link with the outer world. *Sadhana* was his very own, a vehicle for his own *sadhana*, his literary exercises and experiments, a medium for his meditations. Thus was it

different from its successor : for while *Sadhana* was really a running anthology of new writings by Rabindranath, *Sabujpatra* founded a school of new writing, started a movement and saw it through. Inspiration, the cause of *Sadhana*, was *Sabujpatra*'s effect. Pramatha Chaudhuri, with his taste, discipline and critical acumen, was the model editor : and inevitably, in the heyday of *Sabujpatra*, a group of young disciples rose round him, some of whom, in later years, have more or less distinguished themselves as critical writers. That he was born to leadership Rabindranath himself had felt and acknowledged ; it was not personal affection, merely, but literary admiration that made him send his best works of the period to *Sabujpatra*. Two novels, *Chaturanga* and *Ghare-Baire*, appeared in it, the majority of the *Balaka* poems and the prose poems of *Lipika*, besides plays, short stories, songs. It is possible that the paeans to youth in *Balaka* were written specifically for *Sabujpatra*, and certainly it has the distinction of having published more of Rabindranath's work than any other contemporary periodical within the same span of time.*

For yet another reason is *Sabujpatra* memorable : it is the hero in our War of Words. Bengali prose, rough-hewn by Ram-mohan Roy, hammered by Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, became readable and writable with Bankimchandra, who set the standard for next fifty years or so. The rococo extravagances of his style be-

* Bengal has been fortunate in editors ; Bankimchandra, the literary dictator of his time, launched and captained *Bangadarsan*, the first serious literary journal in Bengali ; and Rabindranath in his earlier years conducted quite a number of magazines (including a new series of *Bangadarsan*), fitfully, it is true, but seriously and even strenuously while the fit lasted. Rabindranath, it should be noted here, was as good an editor as it is possible for a creative writer of his proportions to be ; for, although his own work was work enough, he found time to mould those of the younger Tagores who threatened to become writers. More apposite here is the fact that he seems actually to have collaborated in the editing of *Sabujpatra* ; his letters to Pramatha Chaudhuri reveal that he was actively, ardently interested in its career, worried about finding new writers for it, and agonized by its misprints and inordinate delays. This, together with the quantity and variety of his contributions, definitely declares that *Subujpatra* was Rabindranath's creation no less than Pramatha Chaudhuri's.

gan to drop off in his own lifetime, but the essentials persisted for long after : Bengali prose continued to be written in a manner artificially removed from actual spoken language. It would be precise to say that it retained traces of the spoken language of the past and of some dialects of the present, and was artificial in as much as it assumed a form not actually spoken in any part of Bengal, either by the illiterate or the most cultivated. This was felt to be a handicap very early in our literary history ; even before Bankimchandra, the Serampore missionaries wrote and printed specimens of Bengali as spoken at that time in south-west Bengal. (This dialect, by the way, because of the overwhelming influence of Calcutta, has formed the base of the standard spoken Bengali of today.) The next step in this direction was taken by the author who called himself Tekchand Thakur. He made a brave attempt to give literary status to contemporary common speech, but failed, because he was merely colloquial, and to be colloquial is to be a little vulgar. It was that brilliant contemporary of Bankimchandra's the translator of the *Mahabharata*, and the princely lover of literature, Kaliprasanna Sinha, who, in his *Hutom Pyanchar Naksa* ('Sketches by an Owl') first brought literary grace to the spoken tongue. If he had lived reasonably long, the dispute between the two styles might have been settled long ago. But he died unparadonably young, and Bankimchandra was the only author worthy of imitation. His style, known as *sadhubhasha* (the chaste tongue), was adopted by every self-respecting author ; for the style of Hutom, known as *chalitbhasha* (the current tongue), the world of letters and learning had nothing but contempt.

Rabindranath himself, in his prose fiction and essays, was close on the tracks of Bankimchandra, with Saratchandra in hot pursuit. Prose, in the works of the latter two, became increasingly vivid and buoyant, but the structure of *sadhubhasha* remained. The main point of contention between the two styles is the conjugation of verbs* : in *chalit*, they are as actually spoken today by the cultivated classes ; in *sadhu*, as they probably were spoken a few centuries ago and are partly spoken today in provincial dialects. This, of course, implies other differences, so varied and

fundamental that to change from *sadhu* to *chalit*, or *vice versa*, it is not enough to change the verb forms ; the whole has to be re-written. In his earlier fiction, Rabindranath followed Bankim-chandra even to the extent of making the characters speak in the 'book' language. In other words, he sacrificed verisimilitude to convention. Later on, however, he realized this sacrifice to be too great and introduced *chalitbhasha* in dialogues while keeping up the older style in narration. This is the manner accepted by Saratchandra and almost all writers of the last generation : 'book' language for narration and the spoken tongue for dialogues. It is notable that there is only one short novel of Saratchandra's written throughout in the spoken tongue.

From the very beginning of his literary life, Rabindranath rebelled at heart against the prim respectability of *sadhubhasha*, though for long he was unable in practice to break away from it. The spoken language strongly attracted him ; he was in love with its music, its colour, its warmth ; he felt in it an abundance of vitality which he hoped to exploit. And he used it in his 'unofficial' writings, in hundreds of letters, in humorous sketches, and—of course—in his plays and sermons. When he first visited Europe at the age of eighteen, he sent home a series of letters, later collected and published under the title of *Europe-prabasis Patra*, written in lovely and lively prose, the prose of everyday speech. An air of joyous freedom pervades these letters, freedom from the cold formality of *sadhubhasha* ; there is in them a ripple as of bright waters, a sunny playfulness as of young leaves. These qualities Rabindranath cherished, but, for some strange reason, he did not officially adopt the spoken tongue till the appearance of *Sabujpatra*.

He was over fifty then, laurelled by the Nobel Prize, internationally famous. But he had still much more to achieve—how much,

• The reader may compare the following verb forms :

	<i>sadhu</i>	<i>chalit</i>
I was going	Ami jāitechhilām	Ami jāchchhilām
He was doing	Shé karitéchhilo	Shé karchhilo
She was saying	Shé balitéchhilo	Shé balchhilo
You will go	Tumi jāibé	Tumi jābé

The advantage is entirely on the side of *chalitbhasha*.

neither he nor anybody else could at that time possibly imagine. Bengali prose, tired, bored, much more used than tended, was panting for a rejuvenation. Pramatha Chaudhuri, incarnated in *Sabuj-patra*, started the process, and at once Rabindranath was passionately with him. Of *sadhubhasha* he was getting tired on his own account, he was craving for freedom from its fetters, his long-repressed yearning for the spoken tongue had begun to overcome the force of habit. It was exactly at this juncture that the Green Leaf unfurled its banner, sending out its call for courage. Rabindranath responded as a harp to the wind; he was released. *Chaturanga* was his last novel in the old style, *Ghare-Baire* his first in the new. But he was still hesitant, for though this new claimed him more and more, he was unable for some years yet to ring out the old. It was only in old age that he could finally make up his mind—for Rabindranath grew older and bolder at the same time—and persuade himself to write every bit of prose in the spoken tongue, whether fiction or criticism, text-book or Convocation address. His total rejection of *sadhubhasha* completed his conquest of prose, and that on an unpredictable level; he discovered incalculable shapes, shades and depths, and so quickened the process of evolution that in the last ten or twelve years of his life his prose, or Bengali prose, took on more new forms than it had done in the preceding fifty. Across emblazoned *Ghare-Baire*, beyond bejewelled *Sesher Kavita*, his prose, as the years passed, grew sweeter and simpler and more harmonious till, in the very last phase, an utter beauty was born. It would be a grievous wrong if, in our admiration for his poetry, we ever allow ourselves to forget what a great prose-writer Rabindranath is, what a master of rhythmic prose.

I am old enough to remember the battle I have alluded to as the War of Words, the battle that raged over the new style of prose. The pundits were shocked, their pupils scandalized. *Chalit-bhasha* was an object of derision and slander. Calcutta University, in its examination papers set passages from Rabindranath asking would-be passers to turn them to 'chaste and elegant Bengali'. Periodicals bristled with controversy. And in this, Pramatha Chaudhuri was the principal figure. He flung himself headlong

into the fray ; he tilted, he thrust, he parried. He preached, he practised. His serenity was chilling, his flippancy killing. A light-weight Chesterton, a ligh-hearted Shaw, he had neither the ponderousness of the former nor the latter's frenzy. Throughout the battle, both long and furious, he was cool—and deadly. His poise unnerved, his dignity devastated. While opponents foamed and raged, his voice was suavely conversational. He made fun of pedantry till it was torn to bits ; he turned his artillery of wit against the Castle of Conservatism till it trembled, and tottered, and fell. The battle was won ; the claims of the spoken tongue were at least tacitly recognized. It was possible to argue endlessly in theory, but to Rabindranath's examples there was no reply. The author-baiting University itself quailed. Pramatha Chaudhuri, through his writings and his personality, worked as an incessant stimulus, and was thus able directly to influence Rabindranath ; so much so that, for a brief period, Rabindranath was infected by the Pramathean characteristic of puns and other verbal tricks—his *Sabujpatra* stories have a greater measure of them than his prose before or after. It is worth while to remark here that though the battle concluded as it did, Pramatha Chaudhuri's direct imitations soon palled—for word-play is a delicate and dangerous game—and it was only when Rabindranath, his period of indecision over, formally enthroned the spoken tongue that it really began to do its work in the entire body of current literature. The quantity and quality of our recent spoken-tongue prose indicate that though Pramatha Chaudhuri broke the ice, Rabindranath set the stream flowing. Today more and more writers are taking more and more to the new—but no longer new—style, and there are many living who use it exclusively. To those who maintained that *chalitbhasha*, permissible in fiction and light literature, is unthinkable in 'serious' works, a crushing reply has been given by both Rabindranath and Pramatha Chaudhuri who have written in it on philosophy, philology, physics and the agrarian problem : the former magnificently, the latter exquisitely. For all this, newspapers, text-books and works labelled 'research' are even now clinging to *sadhubhasha* : conventions die hard. But they do die—life would have stopped

if they did not—and a time may come when everybody will look upon *sadhubhasha* as what it is : a museum specimen. After all, the influence of literature on language is far stronger than that of either newspapers or school-masters.

III

Pramatha Chaudhuri, being an amused spectator of the drama of life, unruffled and aloof, is wedded to the essay. Like G. K. Chesterton and Max Beerbohm, he has succeeded in inventing a form half-way between the essay and the short story ; for most of his short stories are really essays, being brilliant commentaries on the drama rather than scenes from the drama itself. His stories are never tales, though often they are 'yarns', and very good ones. Stories of character, of psychology, of 'atmosphere', of pure merri-ment—we come across these as we read on in his *Galpasamgraha* ('Collected Stories') ; we meet delightful liars and rogues, eminently companionable ghosts, women of rare beauty, youths carved out of animated bronze, cranks, parasites, charlatans. Though provokingly modern in his essays, his stories are of old-world romance, of dangerous living and abounding animal spirits. Two cities, Calcutta and London figure in his stories, the latter more vividly than the former, but the world of his fiction is really that of Bengal's landed gentry, decadent, yet retaining some traces of court culture. The spaciousness of unearned incomes, rather than the suburbs of clerks and tradesmen, is the proper, or should one say the improper, background for his care-free fancy. In respect of both character and setting, he is attracted by the out of the way : the scene is often laid in odd corners, in railway trains, in hotels and along the road. Interested in neither action nor narration, he never misses a chance of telling his story in dialogue. The First Person Singular inevitably comes in, but this, again, is not a protagonist, but a spectator ; rather the unobtrusive, impersonal 'I' of Maupassant who does not even tell the story, but merely listens. For the mystery of life and the mastery of passion, we shall not go to his

stories : what they reveal is not that life, as we live it every day, is wonderful, but that reality is strange. They are airy and witty, critical and even cerebral, and the best of them are little master-pieces in form.

Formal perfection he has always sought. Though born to a literature naturally given to excesses of enthusiasm and to a language yet untaught in the true discipline of prose, he has, all his life, valued order more than ardour, and precision more than tension, so that, despite his Oscar Wilde-like weakness for epigrams and paradoxes, he has remained incapable of either the suffocating sensuousness or the hypnotic word-music of the English prose-poet. Averse to chiaroscuro, he has insisted on a plain style, low of pitch and level of tone, farthest from oratory and nearest to conversation when conversation becomes an art. His work, therefore, is clear and cold, and the best of it has an icy sparkle meant for the head, but certainly not to go to it. His verses (for he has written some) are interesting experiments in technique and pronounce his kinship with his beloved Bharatchandra who lived (and still lives) on his wit and virtuosity. As Bharatchandra's special gift showed itself in his excellent adaptations of Sanskrit metres, so has Pramatha Chaudhuri delighted in foreign forms : the French sonnet, the dainty triolet, the complicated *terza rima*. There is a certain coldness in his essays too, and in his most animated controversy, for though relentless in analysis, he hardly draws any conclusions himself. He is ever ready to take up arms against seas of folly, but more for the sport than for the pity of it, and more with pity than hope. To quote his own words, he is 'not sad because mankind is bad, but unhappy because it suffers'. The mental attitude corresponding to this temperament is expressed in André Maurois' dictum that the most civilized way of being sad is to be humorous. This French lesson Pramatha Chaudhuri has learnt well, too well perhaps, for he is the most delectable as well as the least moving of our authors.

But it would be fatal to call him a humorist. Nothing is more alien to him than the Dickensian roar. The comic implies the dramatic, but the play, for Pramatha Chaudhuri, is *not* the thing,

but the material, merely. This stage-box view of life may provoke satire, but Pramatha Chaudhuri is too well-bred, altogether too gentlemanly, to be so provoked. He lacks moral passion. He does not hunger for a better world ; he manages not to miss what he has to do without. What he expects from or for mankind is not much, for he cannot afford to be worried or ecstatic or bitter, being the apostle of good cheer, good sense, good taste.

In a sense, he is an author for authors. Though canonized in select circles, Pramatha Chaudhuri has never been 'popular'. The apogee of his career synchronized with that of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay—but how different, how significantly different was the nature of the receptions accorded to the two. Saratchandra was a rage, a craze ; Pramatha Chaudhuri an intellectual vogue. Saratchandra was devoured by everybody, Pramatha Chaudhuri was studied by the cultivated. There were meetings to pay homage to Saratchandra ; Pramatha Chaudhuri was invited to preside. The honour meant for the one was to be endorsed by the other. The one endeared himself so much that he could not be praised too much or too often ; the other seemed too important to be praised at all. Actually, eulogies of Saratchandra consumed reams of paper while relatively little was written about Pramatha Chaudhuri. But perhaps it was just as well, for the ahs and ohs that popularly pass as appreciation would have been an outrage on one who, like Pramatha Chaudhuri, had the art of making an art of all things, whether criticism, controversy or trifles.

It was not until the autumn of 1941 that the long contemplated public reception was given to him—public only in name for only the *élite* was interested. The most notable thing about the event was the publication of a commemoration volume, his *Collected Stories*, with a foreword by Rabindranath. Otherwise, it was a melancholy event, for the shadow of Rabindranath's death still lay heavy on us. The Japanese war broke out soon after, bringing bewildering repercussions on the life of Bengal... Santiniketan was a 'safe' place. And there Pramatha Chaudhuri had to retire, a recluse, a refugee, for it was not in him to look upon Santiniketan as a spiritual home. He was housed in *Punascha*,

named after one of Rabindranath's later books ; and the name, meaning 'Postscript' or 'Yet Again', was an implicit comment on his life and work ; for though he did not add a postscript to his lifelong achievement, having written little of importance in his last days, and little outside autobiographical anecdotes, he is certainly one whom we must read, if at all, again and yet again.

CHAPTER THREE

SARATCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY

A BOYHOOD OF truancy and wild adventure ; a youth recklessly squandered ; a good many years of manhood spent as clerk in a Rangoon office : this was Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's unconscious preparation for the role in which in later years he was destined to appear and enthrall the entire literate population of Bengal. A wayfarer without the ties of a home and a family, he was, for more than half of his life, interested in life for its own sake rather than writing's : his University days, not unlike those of Maxim Gorki's, enabled him to skim the surface of those lower depths which Gorki had probed to the bottom. Already middle-aged when he first appeared on the literary scene, Saratchandra made a complete conquest of his countrymen in the first ten years, gave himself another ten or so to enjoy the fruits of the conquest, and died rather suddenly just as a new critical awareness was beginning to evaluate his work. A life full of drama, aptly divided into different acts, with the curtain discreetly coming down as the theme was about to wear out : a life eminently suitable for biographical rendering. It is a thousand pities that the story of this rich and full-blooded life has not been authentically written to this day, and one has to visualize the man merely from hearsay and stray accounts.

No other Bengali author, not Rabindranath himself had Saratchandra's measure of immediate success. Like Dickens, he was the idol of his public. Fame burst upon his *début*, and with every new book that appeared, he was simply riddled with success. He leapt, in a fraction of the time that Bernard Shaw gave to his nonage, from utter obscurity to the position of the Chief Novelist of his day. Never, right up to the year of Rabindranath's death, has Bengal failed to supply the Poet with scoffers, deriders, antagonists, among whom have been many notables. But about Saratchandra all schools, all sections, all classes were amazingly unani-

mous ; he was applauded by men and women of all ages, ranks, opinions, of all degrees of education or the lack of it. It would not be strange in Bengal to come upon a man (it is more likely to be a woman) who has read no books at all except a few of Saratchandra's. So widely was he read that he found it possible, at a time when payment for authorship was meagre and readers considerably fewer, to live solely on his income as a writer. In Bengal, and therefore in the whole of India, he was technically the first professional writer ; that is to say, he had, after his ascension to authorship, no other occupation but writing, and no other means of material subsistence. Indeed, his earnings multiplied so fast that in a literary career spread out over merely twenty years or so, he was able to buy a small estate in the country, and possess his own Ballygunge mansion.

Yet this success is not of the kind that malicious gods bestow upon English and American best-sellers. Saratchandra, it is true, does not belong to that class of writers whose works are gilt-edged securities of Time, yielding more and more as years pass, and centuries. But what if he is not ? A heart-charmer he has been, a heart-warmer he will always be. One piece of evidence of his remarkable vitality is the hardihood with which his stories stand the strain of stage and screen adaptation. It was Sisirkumar Bhaduri, our greatest stage actor of recent times, who first put him on the stage in the 'twenties, and so effectively that playgoers clamoured for more ; and in no time Saratchandra came to dominate our commercial theatre. It seemed he had all the requisites of a popular playwright, though he had never himself written a straightforward play. The rage, started in his lifetime, has not yet abated : it is still not astonishing to find three of his plays running simultaneously and three or four films in different stages of preparation. And this despite the fact that the responsibility for these plays and films is only in a very restricted sense Saratchandra's. Hacks are entrusted with the dramatization and dialogue : new characters introduced, situations changed ; there are hideous interpolations and monstrous inventions, and sometimes the drama on the stage or the screen is barely as much (or just as little) reminiscent of Sarat-

chandra as to justify his name on the playbills. Yet there is something that survives the most brutal of travesties. There are moments of tension, of tremor, of sudden illumination, which we feel to be Saratchandra all over ; his spirit seems to be incorruptible, or rather, capable of transmigration to an extraordinary degree. His work is not of that class where the form and the spirit are so completely identified that the spirit cannot be conveyed except by those very words originally employed for the purpose : he is not one of those authors for whom the most well-meaning emendations are disastrous. That Saratchandra can brave the worst distortions is in him a curious quality which leads one to think that he is either very gross or very subtle. Perhaps he is both.

II

Popularity is malodorous. An author who has found excessive favour with contemporaries makes us uncomfortable ; the suspicion that there is something wrong in him is hard to exorcize. Yet many of the great have been thus favoured : Dickens and Tennyson are the two renowned examples. What generally happens with such authors is that contemporaries admire them for one set of reasons, and posterity for another. That 'philosophy' of Tennyson's which mid-Victorians found so palatable means little to us today ; what we admire in him is his gift of lyric utterance. Saratchandra's case is similar. The reason he was made so much of by his immediate public was that he had reflected, at the right moment and in the right manner, the conflict rising out of the incompatibility of modern life and the framework of old Hindu society. He has been praised as an upholder of justice, as a moralist, a thinker, even. Hardly a quarter of a century has passed since then, and already it is becoming more and more clear that he is nothing if not a storyteller, and nothing but one.

What really happened was that just as Bengal was beginning to chafe under a social order where grace had yielded place to coercion, Saratchandra came forward with an acute consciousness

of the pain. Dissatisfaction, dim and trembling in many minds, was precipitated into determined opposition by the poignancy of some of his stories. Or would it be true to say that it was the precipitation of discontent that produced those stories, and not those alone, for they were just preceded by certain stories and verse tales of Rabindranath where he opened his most direct attack on the tyranny of tradition ? Rabindranath's words were unequivocal, bolder than ever before : he was definitely out to formulate new human values—and make new enemies into the bargain. Saratchandra, however, sang the song to another tune. His mildness, his wistful smile, his pathos—these brought him on a level with the average reader who tasted in him all forbidden joys without actually encountering the rebellion he still at heart dreaded. It was a disappointment, but also a relief, to find that the eminently marriage-worthy young widow in *Pallisamaj* did not allow her feelings to rob her of the status of widowhood : all the thrill of romantic love was there without any violation of convention. Was it Saratchandra's timidity, or was it reaching out after effect ? Whatever it was, it was bad, and he did worse. Biraj, the wife, atoned her husband's follies and her seducer's sins by herself getting struck with leprosy ; and Kironmoyee (in *Charitraheen*), after having revenged herself on the good man she fruitlessly loved by living 'in sin' with a booby brother of his, finished up in insanity and snored while in the next room the man she had loved lay dying, and died. All these were merely modifications of Saibalini's horrible vision of hell in Bankimchandra : I mean not that the hell was horrible (what else could it be ?), but that it was horrible of Bankimchandra to have inflicted it on his heroine. Often, Saratchandra started with an open revolt, but the moment things came to a head, he stopped short and beat a retreat as if scared by his own temerity. This marred many of his books and made possible his astounding success, for what scared the author would have terrified a great number of readers. For most of us it is a pleasurable experience to be shocked, but quite another to be really roused out of complacency. Saratchandra shocked, threatened, tantalized, but rounded up everything in a nice neat comfortable bundle. Indeed,

his feebleness of artistic conscience served him well in his popularity ; this, really, is why the average Bengali reader is in him much more at home than he can yet be in Rabindranath.

III

Saratchandra is a master of sentiment, of the story of sentiment, and even of the sentimental story. He has never depicted passion, nor life's enchantment or disenchantment, and his sensibility is limited. He has humour, but never achieves comedy ; he has pathos, but tragedy is outside his range. His world is bound up in everyday reality, an altogether *worldly* world, familiar to all, from housemaid to heiress. It is a world of petty jealousies and small kindnesses and 'harmless' love-makings, full of supremely sociable human beings whose actions and conversations are never intruded upon by animals, children or Nature. Life as lived in the imagination has no place ; not one of his characters is 'born under one law, to another bound'. Commonplace reality, or domesticity, is all.

Though a rover from boyhood, or rather because of it, Saratchandra has loved simple, unaffected domesticity as perhaps no other author has. The stories he excels in are of domestic life, or family life, the family, in this context, meaning to include not only brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins etc., but also neighbours, also grocers and gossips : in fact, the entire village. This, no doubt, is the most suitable ambience for the delineation of sentiment. In the family circle, man is reduced to a few simple and essential cravings ; craving for affection, for security, for comfort. The bond between one person and another is the bond of sentiment, which their bitterest falling out cannot uproot. A brother may break a brother's head, a son swear at the mother, one sister-in-law spit venom at another ; but we feel, in fact we know, that all will be well in the end. What if a wife gives the rough side of her tongue oftener than is seemly, at the same time she gives the husband excellent meals. It is highly significant that Saratchandra's women

attend with punctilious care to the meals of the men they love, and attend on them while they do good justice to the food ; for meals are the very core of domesticity, and in domestic life the cooking and serving of them bring out the best in the woman, and the eating and digesting of them the best in the man. Saratchandra's women — whether mothers, lovers or wives — not only see to the meals, but also see the eaters safe in bed, and the ends of the mosquito-nets impeccably tucked in.

This atmosphere prohibits maturity ; and the finest portraits in Saratchandra are, therefore, of adolescents. The colt-like boy, overflowing with animal spirits, moderately blasphemous, immoderately boisterous, with an appearance of fierce untamability, but at heart still longing to eat his rice out of the fingers of the woman who mothers him and whom he loves above all else : this is one of the most memorable creations in Saratchandra. The strain runs throughout : hardly one of his characters is really adult ; the grown-up men have typically adolescent minds, and, one is tempted to add, bodies too, for often, too often, does the author take pride in their physical strength. They run away from the objects of their desire, they go on hurting whom they love best ; and when in so doing they have hurt themselves too much, come back for comfort where they are sure to get it : to the sweet protection of those *anchals*, or hems of saris, which they seemingly want to escape. As for the wearers of those saris, it would be enough to say that the type of woman Saratchandra most vividly brings to life is the *sweetheart*. There is no equivalent for this word in our language, but all that it implies in English his women are and have to the fullest degree. He reveals the sweetheart in the mother, the lover, the wife — the prostitute, even. There is of this last quite a good number in his books, but not one repulsive or pitiful or lurid : they are just as lovely as the others, and what is more, as domestic. Saratchandra's woman, whether child or elderly, mistress or matron, is really an adolescent engaged in comforting her male counterpart, so that in his love stories affection plays a greater part than the passion 'ironically called tender'. Inevitably, scenes of boy-and-girl love are the most beautiful in Saratchandra ; he

is at his best when the protagonists are chronological adolescents instead of chronic ones. For in growing up they threaten to outgrow their author, and he hardly knows how to deal with them. The grip is lost, the ring of truth is gone. The superb sweetheart becomes an unconvincing mistress, the mad bad lovable boy but a poor lover.

IV

Saratchandra's earlier work, on the whole, is most likely to last, for in it he drew on his own resources ; that is to say, he chose, or rather, was chosen by, the right subjects, so that the rest took care of itself. The Brahmin-ridden West Bengal village he knew well enough to carry in his pocket : he knew the dirt, the squabble, the mean plots and counter-plots warring against every chance of beauty, and beauty itself, inviolable, invulnerable, bursting upon the dirt and stink and stagnation. The hypocritical Brahmin, the old wasp-tongued widow, the professional liar and stealer of reputations—they are all redeemed by sudden strokes of compassion. These 'bad' characters—the crust of evil in village societies—have gone to the making of some of Saratchandra's memorable episodes. His two most charming love stories are also of this period ; one Burmese in setting, the other an idyll of Bengal. Again and again in these early stories, the explorer of ugliness is the discoverer of beauty.

But this spell was not to last. As often happens with popular authors, the public tempted him to the role of the preacher, and he succumbed. He ruined a delicious story with anti-Brahmo propaganda ; he launched large-scale novels, going out of his way in search of subjects (instead of allowing subjects to choose him), getting lost in worlds where he did not know his way about. And the final phase was harrowing. His autobiographical picaresque, *Sreekanta*, artistically complete in two parts, would have remained flawless if only the author had so wished—but no ! he must cook up a third part and a fourth to pillory his own creation. Disaster

followed disaster as he took on himself the task of feeding his readers with 'ideas'—ideas he imagined to be modern and hardly understood. *Pather Dabi* ('The Claim of the Road') and *Sesh Prasna* ('The Last Question') were typical of this last, 'ambitious' phase. The first, a melodrama of violent action interspersed with patriotic rant, proved more satisfying to Sexton Blake's flock than Sexton Blake himself, and the second, an essay on the New Morality, was neither new nor moral, nor, for that matter, an essay. It is our grave misfortune that Saratchandra was gulled by his admirers into imagining that he was anything except a storyteller. His rare gifts perished under the heels of misbegotten doctrines.

With the readers, of course, the success of these last was as sensational as the books were themselves. *Pather Dabi* was officially banned, which, by itself, was recommendation enough. *Sesh Prasna* won him favour with intellectual amateurs who for some time seemed set on proving that Saratchandra was a greater writer in fiction than Rabindranath—a futile and rather an irrelevant thing to do. How much Saratchandra owes to Rabindranath's earlier fiction, in manner if not in matter, is too obvious, it seems, to be talked about; but this, again, is beside the point, for indebtedness to Rabindranath is, in a contemporary, to be taken for granted and, by itself no indication of merit or the contrary. This, however, is worth remarking that the early Rabindranath and Saratchandra do *not* represent two different schools of fiction (nor, like Rabindranath and Pramatha Chaudhuri, two different countries of the mind); indeed, there is a certain family resemblance between the two, though Saratchandra defiantly lacks the predecessor's poetry. He has been lucky in so lacking, for it has made of him a Rabindranath Made Easy, and won him a spectacular success through those heart-wringing, tear-bringing qualities in which he has had many imitators but not a competitor. I suppose it is an awful thing to say, but to this day in Bengal, Rabindranath is much less read than sworn by, and much less understood than read; what matters to the public is not his work, but his name, which is universally believed to be a charm and used by all sorts of people on every likely and unlikely occasion; he is

a holy place which everybody must visit, but where it would be uncomfortable and even unbearable to stay. Saratchandra, denudded of orchestral complications, and demanding of the reader nothing but the accustomed responses of domestic life, transforms the Master's 'subtle underflow' to more tangible and readily identifiable spasms, thus inviting the reader to an emotional fancy fair where the excitement of adventure is combined with the security of a picnic. Himself aware of this, Saratchandra is reported to have administered a sharp rebuke to a worshipper who once told him that he held him far above Rabindranath. 'Yes, sir', was Saratchandra's reply, 'I can quite believe it. It's readers like *you* I write for, whereas Rabindranath writes for readers like *me*.' This is true, even if the anecdote is apocryphal, for certainly, Saratchandra wrote particularly for the general reader and Rabindranath generally for the particular readers : the former primarily for the present, the latter finally for posterity. Yet what is intensely of the present essentially belongs to the future, too ; for time is continuous and history cyclic, and historical time not long enough to invalidate the art of one age in another.

CHAPTER FOUR

NAZRUL ISLAM

NAZRUL ISLAM is the greatest poetic energy in Bengali literature after Satyendranath Datta, whose fame was at its highest when young Nazrul, an ex-havildar of the First World War, turned from fighting to writing. Inevitably, he fell under Satyendranath's spell, but at the same time, loudly proclaimed his distinct individuality. Here, then, was a new voice, a new force. Hot, impetuous, extravagant, his verses careered through Bengal, reaching remote corners with winged speed. Several of his volumes, blazing such titles as *The Poison Flute* and *Flames of Destruction*, easily earned the endearing proscription for sedition : the more the rulers frowned, the more the readers favoured him, and his books of poems had the extraordinary good fortune of running into quick editions. His success, making allowances for the necessarily wider appeal of fiction, was almost as immense as Saratchandra's and his is the only instance in our recent literary history where a young poet was immediately acclaimed by the common reader. It is not without reason, however, that we view such success with suspicion. There is, we have seen, a ready market for the literary equivalent of a cocktail ; ambrosia waits. Yet it is not altogether rare to have both served from the same vessel ; and what is remarkable about Nazrul is that he combines the qualities of a fervid lyric poet and an exciting verse-pamphleteer.

His appearance synchronized with that great upheaval in Indian life known as the first non-co-operation movement. In those days, when the whole of India experienced a sudden, a magical sense of release, we in Bengal found in Nazrul Islam a voice of the moment ; for his poetry both assuaged and enhanced the thirst created by the new initiation. He came to fame with a long rhapsodic poem called *Bidrohi* ('The Rebel'), which, followed by others of equal or greater merit, established his reputation. Freedom from bondage was the keynote of the poems of his first phase,

wild, exuberant, delirious poems, intoxicated and intoxicating. Like Dwijendralal Roy and Satyendranath Datta before him, he wrote with equal ardour on Hindu and Muslim subjects, on the dark goddess Kali and on Kemal Pasha. His mind, nourished on the myths and legends of both, was at home as much in the Gangetic plains as in the Arabian desert. Quickened, moreover, by the country's turmoil, he sought to animate every topic with the spirit of enkindled India. Verse alone could not provide enough outlet for his ebullient vitality, and so he founded a weekly which he called *Dhumketu* ('The Comet'). *Dhumketu* started with appropriate blessings from the parent sun, that is, Rabindranath, and after an appropriately meteoric career, appropriately landed Nazrul in jail. Happy and insouciant, Nazrul composed patriotic songs in prison, took up hunger-strike,* broke it after forty days, served his term, came out, married and did as much of settling down as was possible for a man of his restless temper. At this time, he contributed to *Langal* ('The Plough') a series of poems called *Songs of Equality*, a title as explicit as was the name of the paper. Loud, too loud, perhaps, these poems suffer from an excess that marks all Nazrul's poetry, but are free from the disintegrating influence of rigid political creeds.

By this time, having finished the writing of his entire body of considerable Poetry, he was turning more and more to song. As gifted in music as in verse, he had, all the while, been composing songs which he himself set to music and himself sang to an ever-widening circle of friends and admirers. His heroic or patriotic songs, in Bengal called *swadeshi* songs, had begun to gain currency among the general public. There was a demand for more, which, now in his early thirties, he met with a most startling sheaf of *ghazal* songs. It was an unexpected—and to some, not laudable—change from the heroic to the erotic; but both suited him well, and he

* Rabindranath sent a telegram saying: 'Give up hunger-strike, our literature claims you.' It was returned with the superscription: 'Addressee not found.' While Nazrul was still in jail, Rabindranath dedicated to him his then latest work, *Basanta* ('Spring'), a song-cycle. (This work should not be confused with the earlier *Phalguni*.)

transferred to Bengali the charm of the formalized Persian lyric with such success that soon his *ghazals* were on everybody's lips : the elegant young lady could not disdain, nor the street-boy refrain from them. The spate of *ghazals* over, song still followed song, lovely tunes clothed in a poet's words, and more, and yet more of it. The manufacturers of gramophone records were quick to take advantage of his talents, and soon a time came when making songs and making money meant to him the same. In the last decade of his active life, he poured forth an incessant stream of made-to-order songs : love songs, season-songs, comic songs, songs about Radha and Krishna, about Mecca and Medina, dancing songs and prancing songs, songs for the nursery and the boudoir, flimsy songs for *pan*-shops, and heavy, hymnal, sombre songs. It is not surprising that many of these, made mechanically for mechanical reproduction, lack the poetry of their forerunners ; rather it is a wonder that some, despite their commercial genesis, have emerged pretty poems. These have not yet been collected in book-form ; and the total number, yet uncalculated, must be staggering. It has been claimed that Nazrul holds the world's record in the number of his songs : a far from fantastic claim, if it is true that he has outnumbered Rabindranath, who composed well over two thousand. At any rate, Nazrul most possibly holds the record, certainly a record, in the number of recorded songs.

II

In the literary history of Bengal, Nazrul Islam's personal life has been the most colourful, varied, and, in its final phase, the most harrowing after Madhusudan Datta's. Born of poor parents in a West Bengal border district, he had never had any proper schooling, and there was little to check his overflowing energy and turbulent disposition. He was associated with a troupe of village singers ; and twice he ran away from home, once living with a family in East Bengal village, and, again, working as a baker's boy in a town nearer home. The war served him as a more definite

escape, for he enlisted in adolescence, and never returned to the home he left. Born a Muslim and married to a Hindu, he has been abused and doted on by Hindus and Muslims alike, himself partaking of the life of both. To meet him has been to love him, for his is one of the most picturesque and attractive personalities in our recent history. One of Nature's own bohemians, he has passed his life in a manner enchanting to friends and embarrassing to the family. Where he was, there was delight ; and he was seldom at home. Not good at conversation, he made up the deficiency with laughter and gesture and, of course, song. A good voice was not one of his endowments, but the joy, the tireless joy he brought to the singing of his own songs kept his audience for hours together he would and could sing, aided by tea, by *pun*, and a harmonium. A shocking spendthrift (again like Madhusudan), utterly reckless in business transactions, never caring for the morrow, he lavished his life-force on others, perhaps impoverishing himself. On this brilliant scene the first dark shadow was cast when his wife was stricken with paralysis. The doctors despaired, and the poet turned to supernatural cures. His face began to show signs of age ; he blundered with yoga and secret rites till one day he had to be put under the observation of mental specialists.... And that has been the end. A vagrant he has been, a soldier and a prisoner ; he has been poor and rich ; he has shouted himself hoarse in Calcutta football fields and spent silent hours over the chess-board ; he had once started a gramophone shop (pre-destined to liquidation !), and even acted in a play and a film ; he has been loved by every notable contemporary and numerous un-notables ; he has been a living denial of everything that withers the heart (orthodox Brahmin ladies have looked upon him as a son) ; his name has been a synonym for charm. And life casts him off before his fiftieth year, for his affliction, which has nothing in it of the 'frenzy of Lear or Blake' is feared to be as unmitigable as his wife's paralytic chains are relentless. The last days of Madhusudan and Henrietta were not a more excruciating anti-climax.

III

Nazrul, I repeat, is a loud poet ; his poetry is boisterous. That Kiplingesque clangour which made him widely read also subjected him to pitiful falls. He has written much that is heart-warming along with a lot of rant, himself unable to discern the difference. His effusiveness, painful in descriptive nature-poems, becomes intolerable in prose, which, indeed, he should never have written. Irrepressible facility, his constant companion, is an outrage on the stricter discipline of prose ; and how few, relatively how few are the moments when it works in his verse like inspiration ! One feels, as one reads him, that words simply got the better of him, so that he could never pause to ponder or alter, and was rather at a loss where to stop. Despairing editor-friends locked him up in a room with pen, paper and a copious supply of tea ; and a poem was ready in an hour. Marvellous and enviable no doubt ; there is nothing like it when it works. But when it does not, or rather when it tricks the poet into imagining that it is working without actually doing so, the most lamentable lapses are the result. Nazrul's gift is rather like Byron's : gorgeous, but undependable ; the same raw violence ; that interminable, almost involuntary flow ; that carefree and even careless workmanship ; and above all, that thinness of thought-substance. What Goethe said of Byron is literally true of Nazrul : 'The moment he thinks, he is a child.'

What makes things worse for Nazrul is that he has none of Byron's relieving quality of sarcasm. In his celebrated *Bidrohi* he said : 'I am ever a child and ever a youth.' This, with profound irony, has turned true in his life's work. For twenty-five years he has written like a boy of genius, without ever growing up or maturing. The sequence of his works does not give a history of development ; what he wrote at thirty-five is not markedly different from what he wrote at twenty. His Muse, as Rabindranath once remarked of one of his elder contemporaries, was a bad housewife. Power he had, but lacked discipline ; a great zest, but no taste. And so his power took him only half-way.

It is in his songs that he has given us his best. His songs, as poems, are, on the whole, more satisfactory than his poems.

Space being limited, many of his congenital defects are necessarily debarred. A small number of his songs is perfect ; that the number is not larger is due to his lack of taste. Many a lovely lyric has been marred by one vulgar word ; many a flower bitten by the worm of coarseness. His contribution to music is also important, for he has devised an ample variety and richness of tunes. It is necessary to add that he is not what in England is known as a librettist ; he is a composer in the Indian sense, making both the words and the music. Music and the poetry of words, lovingly allied in India, are inseparably wedded in Bengal, so that a composer must also be a gifted word-wielder. In classical Indian music, so called because of its ancient origin, words are no more than pleasing containers of the *ragini*, or the melodic pattern, whereas in the music of Bengal, the words are valued at least as much as the tune. It is not surprising, therefore, that our greatest composer should also be our greatest poet : in the songs of Rabindranath, the poetry and the music seem to be born for one another. What emerges out of this perfect union is not a heightening of our pleasure in poetry or in music, but a third factor, something more disembodied than poetry can be, and more intellectual than the nature of music will allow, winging its way upwards to a heaven where, unaided, neither music nor poetry can reach. Nazrul, if he had agreed to exert himself, could have attained a similar mastery in song ; but his natural gifts, unfed by acquirement, suffered chronically. Is it just an unfortunate accident, or does it suggest the degree of potency ? I mean, is not the measure of talent proportionate to one's power of acquirement ? In other words, is it not true that the better one can learn, the greater is the talent ? And since the nature of what is called genius eludes the knowledge of even its possessors, and talent, though less forbidding, cannot be assessed except by its own products, how else can we try to account for greater and lesser poets but by considering the magnitude of the tasks they imposed on themselves, and the exactitude with which they acted as their own taskmasters ? If, granting that the initial, irresistible impulse is invariable, we assume that all poets start from the same point, there yet remains the great 'inequa-

lity in the fraternity, forcing on us the conclusion that, though talent is a free gift, achievement must be earned. The more one exerts oneself, the more one gains in power, and the more one gains in power, the more one can exert oneself. Unfortunately, Nazrul Islam is one of those poets who prove this conversely, warning others at his own cost.

Though only half-way to heaven, the songs of Nazrul, carefully selected, will serve, more than any other of his work, to convince us of his essential validity. In the best of them we meet a jocund spirit, a spirit so happy to life. His marching songs are rightly renowned ; he has free access to the sanctuary of love ; he is not a stranger to humour. A versatile song-maker, he has many moods and the right phrase for each. It is doubtful whether he will be remembered as the 'rebel-poet' or 'the poet of the have-nots', but he is prepared to meet posterity with a garland of songs. What if the garland is small. Time will wear it.

CHAPTER FIVE

MODERN BENGALI POETRY

IT is awkward to write about the poetry of one language in another. But it has been done, and, in this world of shrinking distances, has got to be done. Unfortunately, however, the barriers of speech are no easier to overcome today than they were in the past ; each language has still its geographical limitations, and poetry is still the last to yield to the translator's white magic. For, in poetry, words are not merely a medium to transmit a message, a tale or some instruction, but are valued for their own sake ; and to address a discourse on a poetry whose language the audience does not know is, one might feel, to verge nearly on absurdity. If, after all, this apparent absurdity has sometimes been overcome, and some have been emboldened to undertake this delicate literary operation, the reason is our instinctive faith in the unity of human nature, our not unjustifiable belief that even a description of what has delighted one group of human beings will at least interest another.

Here I shall venture no more than to record the recollections of my own pleasures in the modern poetry of my language. If I cannot make the reader (who, I assume, is an alien-in-language) share the pleasure with me, I can at least hope to convey its genuineness ; in other words, I hope he may be persuaded to recognize the validity of my experience, though not drawn into the experience itself.

'Modern' is an uncomfortable word, a cause of confusion and a brewer of battles. It is a word liable to excite passions : some it scares right away, and some simply gloat over it. Quite a considerable section of literary thought is inclined to give it a qualitative connotation : one often comes across phrases and sentences where 'modern' is intended to mean a new *quality* which is the exclusive possession of recent literature. I myself am generally content to use it in a more modest and restricted sense : that of the chronologically recent. In critical jargon, 'modern' is used indiscrimi-

nately in at least three distinct senses : firstly, the broadly historical, as when we say that Kalidasa is an ancient and Rabindranath a modern ; secondly, as denoting contemporaneity ; and lastly, in that abstract, qualitative sense which permits the use of such uneasy nouns as 'modernity' or 'modernism'. The first sense is innocuous ; and so is the second, when not tagged on to the third, which is the source of trouble. How far it is, for an author, an act of merit to be living in the same moment of time as ourselves, and how long that merit lasts, are alluringly polemical questions : all I want to say here is that an author can be modern for ever, but 'a modern' only for a while, or, to be precise, no longer than twenty years. What I mean is that each generation has its own set of 'the moderns', and to claim for each a new and exclusive aesthetic quality is to deny continuity to history and unity to human nature. It seems to me, rather, that in literature, newness is not synonymous with recentness ; that the truly new, whatever its date of origin, is always so, for it is that which fits into the context of any age or society. When we look at literature as a whole, contemporaneity appears merely factual, and 'modern' takes on a qualitative connotation only by identifying itself with the eternal.

Here, at any rate, I am concerned with no more than the factually contemporaneous, and mainly with that part of it which is not new simply because it is recent, or notable simply because it is new. The period of Bengali poetry under discussion is not a 'period' yet, for we are living through it right now. The progenitors of this poetry have had the dubious luck of being born Rabindranath's contemporaries : dubious, for the incalculable advantage of being alive and young when Rabindranath was alive and gloriously ageing also brought in its train certain serious and rather peculiar problems. I do not know that any single poet in history so completely permeated the language and the literature of his country and his time as Rabindranath in his later years. Inevitably and rightly, young poets were steeped in him ; but what was neither inevitable nor right was that many, instead of journeying with him and in him, were led to use him as an anchor. For these, it was impossible not to imitate Rabindranath, and it was impossible

to imitate Rabindranath. Thus the illusion grew that one could achieve Rabindranath's sweetness by jingling a large enough number of rhymes, and his almost ethereal tenderness by plunging headlong into sentimentality. The literary tendency implied in this was apotheosized by two writers : Satyendranath Datta in verse, and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay in prose. Both enjoyed such popular appreciation as, truth to tell, Rabindranath had never : which, however, should not be noted as a preposterous contradiction to what has been said above. Rabindranath, though he incarnates the best in our life and thought, or because of it, has percolated to the people only in thin and variously adulterated doses ; the populace wants to honour him, but cannot comprehend why he is to be honoured, and satisfies itself with diverse forms of idolatry. This being so, it is exquisitely, even ironically, appropriate that Bengal should have produced two popular versions of him, two Rabindranaths Made Easy, one in prose, and the other in verse.

Satyendranath Datta, who died in 1922, was born a poet, but made of himself a prince of rhymesters. He produced, habitually and happily, hundreds of delicious metrical novelties, and accidentally, a handful of beautiful poems. There was not one young or would-be poet of his time whom his cadences did not captivate ; his influence is clear in the earlier work of not only the strident Nazrul Islam or the muscular Mohitlal Majumdar, but even of the cloudy Jibanananda Das. I say 'even', because no two poets could be more dissimilar, temperamentally more divergent. Satyendranath is cheerful, sociable, chirpy ; Jibanananda shy, sombre and a little frightened of what is popularly known as life. Angular in form, eccentric in diction, Jibanananda is so obstinately himself that he seems to have abandoned the home-land of tradition in favour of a gnome-land all his own. His world is one of tangled shadows and crooked waters, of the mouse, the owl and the bat, of deer playing in moonlit forests, of dawn and darkness, of ice-cold sea-nymphs and the great sweet sea. All things hidden, forlorn, furtive, all things wanton and non-human are dear to him ; some of his most characteristic poems are on birds and beasts ; and when he praises a woman it is one whose eyes are like birds'

nests and who is seen in the dark 'as mariners, lost in far seas, glimpse the dim greenness of cinnamon islands'. His dominant tone is grey (quite befittingly, he calls his first book of mature poems *Grey Manuscript*) ; but on occasions he can speak of 'the red sunlight sweating over curtains and carpets', of 'soft saffron sunsets in autumn', and of the 'silver harvest' of the moonlit sky. Rabin-dranath noticed the pictorial quality of Jibanananda's work : indeed, it is marvellously pictorial. 'Tender green light like young lemon-leaves', 'the river-woman strewing her flowers of mist', 'ducks, smelling sleep by the pond at dusk', 'the wild wind rushing like numberless zebras whom the lion's roar has scattered all over the plains' ;—each of these is a poem by itself. Sometimes he paints with words an exact equivalent of the still-life, as in that lovely poem where he speaks of 'the orange sunlight, the smell of faded crab-apples, melon-wine in wine-red glasses', and the 'bare, lonely hand' of a woman 'whose face through centuries, I have neither seen nor sought'. All poets, in a sense, are poets of Nature, but Jibanananda is so in a rather special sense : he is absorbed in nature, physical nature, and in certain aspects of it. A nature-worshipper, but by no means a platonist or pantheist ; he is rather a pagan who loves the things of nature sensuously, not as tokens or symbols, nor as patterns of perfection, but simply because they are what they are. Not content with mere seeing, he must possess nature through the more savage senses of touch and smell ; he loves the smell of birds' wings, and the warm smell of water in which rice has just been washed ; and he wishes he could be 'born as grass in the deep sweet womb of some great dark Grass-Mother'. He has a leaning towards the exotic and even the grotesque ; but his atmosphere has nothing uncanny or unearthly, nothing of the supernatural shiver of Coleridge, nor the silver aura of de la Mare's fairies. Neither angel nor demon, he is rather a satyr without the goat-feet, rather a Pan in pixy-cap, turned gentle and wistful. He brings us no breath of heaven, nor blasts of hell, draws up no molten metal from the unfathomed mind ; what he does is to intensify the everyday experience of our senses to a point where it seems transformed, transcendent, miraculous. He is important

because he has brought a new note to our poetry, a new tone of feeling, and has tuned our ears to a subtle melody drawn from apparently conventional patterns of verse, for, despite the metrical seductions of modern Bengali, he has confined himself throughout to a single metrical norm, and that the oldest. It is rather remarkable that, though metrically a hermit, he has yielded to the prose poem and made it as haunting as his verse.

II

The seed of Satyendranath Datta became active in Nazrul Islam, who, like him, performed the unusual feat of being nothing, but a writer of verse and at the same time widely read. The reasons for this popularity, in the case of the first, are topicality, lilting measures and a comfortable explicitness that makes no demand on the reader's mental faculties. Nazrul Islam has all these, and something more : an orator-like loudness which contrasts exquisitely with the sinuous whisperings of Jibanananda. These qualities with different sets of modifications, re-appear in Premendra Mitra and, after an interval of about twenty years, in Subhas Mukhopadhyay. Both had possibilities of that rare combination (rare, in the present time, in a poet) of excellence and popularity, though neither has achieved the 'success' of the two predecessors. Premendra once permitted himself to declare that he was a poet of the 'coolie and the lowly', and Subhas burst upon us with the avowal that he had cast his lot with 'workers and peasants'. This has been unfortunate, for this has imposed official robes on these two, robes differing slightly in colour, but equally eclipsing. I mean that the incidental in their work has been unduly stressed, and the essential ignored. Poetry, if it is to be most effective as poetry, should not have too exciting or too definite a surface meaning ; the spell works best when the poem is imperfectly 'understood'. These two poets, often brilliant in execution, have suffered because of a tendency to poetical oratory ; it has distracted attention from the poetry itself to the gibes, the gestures and the 'message'.

Subhas wears his robes well ; in fact, they now seem to have grown into his skin. But Premendra is uneasy in his, and has often tried to throw them off. I hope I have not given the impression that he has quite acted up to his vow to be a poet of the lowly ; no, he is too much of a poet for that. He has ample variety though not profusion ; quick, crisp and sparkling, he flits from mood to mood, and just seems to fit in everywhere. He is one of our earliest practitioners—one might say pioneers—of the prose poem : no wonder that his verse prefers the spoken, even the colloquial diction. Whether on old newspapers or the South Seas, whether tinkling rhymes or not, his poems are light-footed and light-hearted : they are like boys who have been playing in the open and have just rushed ruddily into the room. Premendra likes open air and adventure, and is really more interested in travel and exploration than in the problems of social exploitation. Fascinated by the faraway, he not only conjures romance from geographical names, but sometimes discovers poetry in geography itself.

Geography is present also in the work of Amiya Chakravarty, but with a difference. Premendra's experience of the wide world is through books and films, Amiya Chakravarty's through the reality. This, I hasten to add, implies no valuation. To the imaginative, a representation can be as stimulating as the object, the experience of books as valid as that of life, and even more so. The distinction I want to make is this : Premendra roams in fancy, picking up facts on the way ; whereas facts are Amiya Chakravarty's material and fancy their editor and commentator. The former describes places remote not in space only, but in time as well ; the latter is intensely contemporaneous. Next to Rabindranath, Amiya Chakravarty is the most widely travelled Bengali poet ; and we could have told it from his poems if we had not known it for a fact. Rabindranath's reticence about his foreign travels is remarkable : outside his travel-books, there is but little evidence in his prose or verse that he had seen any country except—no, not India even, but only Bengal. In fiction, except for that short and memorable Oxford episode in *Sesher Kabita*, he never lays the scene in a foreign land ; in verse, he never evokes the atmosphere

of any land except Bengal, confining himself, in the main, to his own Padma and his own Santiniketan. What is more, his Muse languished in foreign shores ; barring a few songs in the *Gitanjali* cycle and, of course, the usual sheaves of letters and journals, he has produced but little while abroad. The notable exception is the South American voyage which brought forth the magnificent *Puravi* ; on that occasion, on ship and on shore, he wrote like one possessed and that was because he was ill and thought he was going to die.* Rabindranath, a tireless traveller in the body, was in spirit, inalienably Bengal's ; his works, of the world in spirit, is in body entirely Bengali. The paradoxes of the poetic nature are astonishing.

In this respect, Amiya Chakravarty offers a perfect contrast to his Master. He has quite an un-Tagorean habit of using his mind as a camera which he clicks on ports and plains and cities ; but the pictures he brings out are coloured and not motionless ; his poems, alluringly unfamiliar, are like Walt Disney shots. 'Strange' is the word that would automatically rise to one's lips when one reads him for the first time. Strange landscape, strange language, strange faces. As one reads on, one is tempted to call him a cosmopolitan, even a habitual wanderer ; but that is not all the story, for his hunger for the world is, at bottom, balanced by a consciousness of ancestral traditions. All the same, his definite contribution to our literature is that same strangeness, a quality which, at first sight, shocks us out of torpor, and, later on, brings about unexpected responses of delight. At home in any country, he has an exile's poignant feeling for his own, and comes to us as one who is nostalgic for home and the world at the same time ; who speaks our tongue, but with a slightly foreign accent, and is attractive, very attractive.

He is definitely and defiantly modern in appearance. Making only a little use of an inborn gift for verse, he has forged for himself a new prose rhythm in which most of his poems are written. It is half verse and half prose, with rhymes meant to be heard rather than seen, and effects a curious blending of everyday speech

* For this notion, I am indebted to Sudhindranath Datta, the poet.

and archaic words. Compression is his aim ; he has a device of dropping verbs and leaving phrases unconnected ; and this, though it makes certain passages read like catalogues, often gives an intriguing charm to his lines. The following are literal translations of a few :

Hills, rows of islands, red-roofed houses.

The rain falls
In the lane-with-umbrellas.

The river. Who passes, glimmering in the lamp-post shadows,
Shivering along bends ? You.

III

Modern Bengali poetry includes much of Rabindranath, but here it is not to my purpose to bring him in unless unavoidable. The Bengali prose poem, very much in vogue today, is a subject where we must start from him. Despite the English *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath did not venture on a prose poem in his own language till much later ; and his *Lipikā*, the first Bengli book of prose poems, printed like prose, is, for that reason, still looked upon as a prose work. At that stage, Rabindranath did not feel sure whether he could tax the 'gentle' reader so much as to tell him that these prose pieces were really poems ; but when, ten years later, he came out with his *Punaścha*, he arranged the lines like verse, and had no hesitation in declaring that this was a book, not of little tales, but of poems. Meanwhile, two of our writers, the ancient Abanindranath Tagore and the infant Premendra Mitra, had played with this form ; but it was with the publication of *Punaścha* that the prose poem was established in Bengali, and soon after rose a young, a very young poet, who, contrary to our beliefs, succeeded in the prose poem without having practised his hand in verse. Samar Sen is our only poet who has written only prose poems and no verse at all. His first (and still his finest) batch of poems, coming on the heels of *Punaścha*, revealed a new norm of the prose poem,

which, by itself, was an achievement for one so young. They are little lyrics, pale, frail and wistful ; flowers of youth, or buds of adolescence, but not raw fruits of immaturity. And like all young and tender things, they have, under a vulnerable appearance, an inner and insidious strength that is hard to define or resist. In later years, he has been much inclined to make current politics his theme, ably demonstrating the essential incompatibility of poetry and politics. His output is meagre, his speech thin-lipped ; he lacks fervour, he does not take himself seriously enough. But the early lyrics are unaffected by the weaknesses of the poet whom, I venture to hope, they will continue to celebrate. Here is one typical passage :*

The Dark came like a beast of prey. The burning sky of the West reddened like an oleander blossom.

That darkness brought to the earth the scent of *ketaki* flowers, and to the eyes of some the languorous dreams of night. That darkness lit the trembling flame of desire in a girl's soft body.

Bishnu Dey, Samar Sen's elder, and much more gifted and versatile a poet, was immediately persuaded by this young poet to adopt the prose poem and begin to take an interest in Marxian thought. That these two have admired and influenced one another has yielded happier results to the elder than the younger. Bishnu Dey's poetry is a record of development. An admirer of Bharat-chandra and Pramatha Chaudhuri, with a keen sense of form and a feeling for the texture of words, he made a conspicuous beginning with triolets, ballads and light verse, soon transformed himself to an interpreter of contemporary social life, and finally came out as a singular, serious and difficult poet. He is polished, accomplished, dazzling ; a daring innovator in technique ; self-conscious and hard-working. His poetic character is seen in the way he is constantly revising his work, rearranging earlier verses so as to give them an import not intended at the time of composition, joining fragments and occasional pieces in a wider significance, and in his excellent translations and adaptations of foreign poets, from whom

* This translation is quoted from the *Times Literary Supplement*, February 1, 1936.

his borrowings are apposite and admirable. What is not so admirable, however, and what makes an awful mess of his imitators' work, is his habit of slicing out lines from Rabindranath, changing them slightly and whimsically, and placing them in incongruous contexts. This process could be justified if the lines were improved, or a new meaning given to them ; but the impression we really get is one of irrelevant frivolity or, worse, unintended parody.

Bishnu Dey has been much discussed in recent years ; some have extolled, and many defamed him. The main argument of his detractors is his 'obscurity', by which is meant his elliptical manner, his literary allusiveness, and his use of obsolete Sanskrit and weird European words. But many, I think, has been repelled by what is no more than a novel means of presentation ; in truth, and at his best, Bishnu Dey has no more obscurity than the very nature of poetry demands. What is really disconcerting is that his grammar is careless, and sometimes, though not often, he indulges in an incoherence which makes one wonder why the lines and stanzas are placed in the order they are, and not in some other, for juxtaposition does not appear to make any difference. But even then, the lines are luminous and the stanzas echoing ; and the great virtue of Bishnu Dey's poetry is, I think, a haunting music which can come only from one who writes poetry because he must.

IV

The majority of our modern poets have welcomed the prose poem, but two have stood firmly against it, both in theory and practice, Sudhindranath Datta and Annadasankar Ray. It is well worth saying here that the two, in two different worlds, are great artificers in prose : Sudhindranath's critical essays are an illumination, and Annadasankar, in his fiction and *belles-lettres*, is a writer of beautiful prose. He began as ardently in verse as in prose, but turned more and more to the sumptuousness of the latter, and for some years wrote no verse, or all but none. His recent appearance in the sphere of limericks, clerihews and doggerels is a joyful event ;

for he is a master of light verse, and light verse is not necessarily slight. Annadasankar has effected that marriage between poetry and wit which is at once so happy and rare ; he has the secret of turning topical comments to an art, and his fun ranges from the 'People's War' to mosquito-bites. That rippling, dancing lightness which marks his prose also animates all the verse he has written, and has led him to rediscover the *chhāḍā*, the measure of our old ballads and nursery rhymes.

Sudhindranath Datta is altogether different. There is nothing in him that is happy or light or sparkling ; all is dark, darkly and bitterly passionate. There is a profound unity in all his poems ; each is a part of a larger whole, and that whole larger than the sum of the poems. Poem after poem, he is working on a theme, expounding and elaborating it, repeating and correcting himself. His first mature work, *Orchestra*, is in some ways a unique book in our language. It is a book of love poems, not the mystical love of the Vaishnavas, nor the idyllic love of Rabindranath's *Kṣāṇikā*, but a blind, violent and terrible love, born and bound in the body, without relief, release or hope of release. The poems have an unprecedented setting ; for the lover is blasé and past his prime, and the mistress a young foreigner whose country is the place of action. The moment of time is when the lovers have been separated — irrevocably ; and the whole drama, seen and revealed through memory, is charged with an anguish and a fury that the poet strains every nerve to hold in leash. It is characteristic, and also a measure, of Sudhindranath's powers that, in these poems, he has combined the passionateness of youth with the contemplation of maturity. Separation, in Indian poetry, is traditionally sweet and serene, and even a channel of grace ; but to this poet, separation is infernal and serenity death. Yet this has not made of him an youthful idolater of the flesh ; his is a mind that can see the clay in the idol, though not the symbol in the clay ; a mind brave and self-reliant, desperately holding on to the ceremony of the intellect when all his world appears to be doomed. *Orchestra* is breathless with pain, the pain of memory which the poet can neither bear nor bear to think that time will deaden ; it is 'heavy with the burden

of Fate', for the present is dead and the future lightless, the only reality being the past, red with the flames of memory. The poems have caught the glow : they are as living as the love they describe.

Sudhindranath Datta appeared on the literary scene rather late in life. His equipment was enviable, his discipline exemplary. His splendid poems were not an immediate 'success'—for it is not easy to fall in love with them at first sight—and the recognition he deserves has not yet come to him. He, too, has been blamed for obscurity, and mentioned in the same breath with Bishnu Dey, though the two have little in common. Sudhindranath, far from being obscure, is a model of lucidity, in as much as he does his best to give his verse a prose-like regularity. He is ratiocinative, and delights in pursuing an argument from point to point, and from stanza to stanza, right to its logical conclusion. Indeed, I should rather find fault with him for being, on occasions, too logical, too conclusive, and making a poem, with an array of 'although's, 'therefore's and 'yet's, almost like an Euclidean proposition. The only difficulty we are likely to encounter in him is a highly Sanskrit vocabulary, and here it is not the words that so much trouble us as their connotations, for he often uses some word in its original Sanskrit sense, a sense lost to Bengali, or coins new forms from old, well-known roots, and that for a very good reason. His aim being to charge words with maximum meaning and reduce their number, he is not to be blamed if the current Bengali vocabulary does not suffice him. On the contrary, he is to be praised for the directness he has brought to our language, for the number of vital words and compounds he has coined, for his having made us newly and differently aware of the riches of Sanskrit, and, lastly, for his effective harmonization of the commonest idioms and a classical diction, of dramatic declamation and meandering soliloquy.

Rabindranath once wrote of him in a letter :

I know Sudhindra Datta's poetry from its beginning, and have grown rather partial to it. One reason for this is that it has taken much of its shape, and that quite unhesitatingly, from my work. Yet its nature is entirely his own. His individuality, free from arrogance, has never neglected to make acknowledgments to the proper sources. This courage comes from power. (*Translation mine.*)

The above is aptly said, for Sudhindranath gleans freely from Tagorean harvests, not, like Bishnu Dey, archly, self-consciously, or with implied sarcasm, but in a straightforward manner, never trying to conceal what is true for him and each of his contemporaries, that Rabindranath lives in him. He does not have to employ any startling or oblique means to show that he is unlike Rabindranath ; often has he allowed Tagorean utterance to be heard through his voice, and yet his difference is throughout irresistible ; his individuality, uniformly and totally beyond question.

V

These poets, living in the same age and country, have, and indeed, must have, some sort of family resemblance. But stress should not be laid on that ; instead of noting what a poet cannot help doing, that is, belonging to a certain time and place, we should rather observe what he has done to himself, or made of himself. The historian's habit of labelling and grouping often blurs outlines and distorts features of individual poets. If we are lovers of literature, we must walk warily. We must, for instance, distinguish between the 'fleshlines' of Mohitlal Majumdar and that of Sudhindranath Datta : the former a foaming, vigorous male, the latter ponderous, proportioned and heavily shadowed with thought. We must distinguish between Jibanananda's russet richness and the brooding melancholy of Sanjay Bhattacharya ; between Premendra's moist salt and the juicy wetness of Achintyakumar Sengupta. Also, we must learn to travel from Amiya Chakravarty's two-dimensional fantasies to the solid masses of Nishikanta's landscapes ; from Subhash Mukhopadhyay's staccato declarations to the slanting wit of Dines Das ; from the cold, clear lyrics of Ajit Datta to the cool, dewy lyrics of Asokvijay Raha ; and accommodate ourselves to such sharp contrasts as offered by Jasimuddin of old Bengal ballads and Kamakshiprasad Chattopadhyay, darting and up-to-date. It has been my endeavour to emphasize the individual nature of each,

rather than present our poets as belonging to a group, or groups, or to the same age, which, after all, is accidental.

From Nazrul Islam to Subhash Mukhopadhyay, these poets appeared, roughly speaking, between 1918 and 1938, the twenty blessed years, as they now seem, between the two wars. This, for Bengali poetry, and for Bengali literature as a whole, has been a happy period indeed, what with the incalculable wealth of Rabin-dranath's later phases and the new poets, coming out one after another. Enthusiasm ran strong ; hope shooted up to the skies. Today, however, the scene is very much changed ; changed, I ruefully add, for the worse. Nazrul though living, is lost ; and some have ceased writing poetry or all but so. If we ask whether the young poets of the 'thirties have fulfilled their promise, the answer must be a sorrowful no. Samar Sen, who in his teens, gave us his lovely *Poems*, seems to be utterly spent out with the first flush of youth ; and Subhash Mukhopadhyay has quite succeeded in asphyxiating the poet in him with the gas of political propaganda. Politics, at present is playing havoc with our literature : writers, even some of the quite reputable ones, seem divided into political camps ; and there is a brisk and dismal canvassing to recruit and be recruited. An appallingly large number of people has started thinking that it is no longer important that a work should be good ; all that matters to them is that it should conform to some particular brand of political ideology. Disastrous for young writers, this has adversely affected some of the elders too. Bishnu Dey's poetry, since his conversion to Marxism, seems to have lost its 'champagne flavour' : what is more, and more distressing, Jibanananda, by nature the loneliest of our poets, is stuffing his recent work with 'war and war's alarms'. lest some should figure him out as an incorrigible 'escapist'. Yet another calamity has befallen the young poetical aspirant in the form of the prose poem : the 'poem' is forgotten, and only the 'prose' adhered to ; with the result that much of what appears in print as 'poetry' is journalism, inept journalism, written in vulgar prose, arranged, for no reason at all, in longer and shorter lines. The rudimentary discipline of versifying and rhyming negated, and the subject-matter, without being con-

ceived in the soul, dictated by teleprinters, there is nothing to wonder that anarchy, mere anarchy is loosed upon the young writers of today. Ability there is, energy plentiful ; but all is wasted because 'success', some ephemeral form of it, can speedily be obtained merely by wishfully thinking that our present woes will necessarily lead to some golden future, no matter how chimerical the facts of history prove this to be. One hopeful sign is that the young writers, at any rate a good number of them, are themselves conscious of this frustration : they are asking themselves what is wrong with their work, and are seeking the answer in street-scenes and Reuter's despatches. But to attribute one's own inability to write a good poem to wars, famines and revolutions is the worst form of escapism : rather, if that notorious word has a meaning, this, indeed, is it. The state of mind granted, nothing can prevent the birth of word-apparelled beauty, neither wars, nor revolutions, nor famines ; and those who seek poetry, not within themselves, but in the waywardness of events, do so for no other reason than their own spiritual atrophy. One cannot control the world, but one can master one's own mind. The mind is the stage where all poetry happens ; the world of events is only the ever-shifting scenery. A time will certainly come, and that signalize another new movement in our poetry, when the young poets, like Sir Philip Sidney, will wake up to the inner, their own inner voice : 'Fool ! Look in thy heart and write'.

CHAPTER SIX

MODERN BENGALI PROSE

RABINDRANATH, I have said, made Bengal a part of Europe, and the Bengalis citizens of the world. To be precise, Rabindranath is the culminating point in a process started long ago, with the stabilization of British power in the country. His was the kingdom, but the major battles were already won by Rammohan Roy and Isvar-chandra Vidyasagar, the two builders of the new Bengal, diverse and to some extent mutually exclusive, but with one thing in common : a strong leaning toward European mode of thought. These two, each in his world, represent the invitation and the welcome Bengal accorded to England, and through England, the world ; Bengal alone, not the whole of India, nor any other part of it. That the conquered, despite the fact of subjugation and the horrors that must precede and accompany it, should acclaim the conqueror is rather curious, but this is what happened when Bengal met Europe, and the former's spontaneous response to the Western spirit remains a unique fact in recent history. The rest of India, in those early days of disorder, was hostile, cold, crustaceous : only Bengal absorbed Europe with speed and thoroughness that should be marked as a record in human relations. This has been deplored by some in Bengal as a cultural conquest, and capitalized by some of the British as proof of the white man's superiority : two sides of the same illusory shield. Bengal, certainly, was transformed ; but the transformation was neither equal in magnitude nor similar in nature to what happened during the Roman conquest of England, or, to come to more recent times, the Americanization of Polynesia ; and that for the two following reasons : Firstly, Bengal had already participated for centuries in a civilization remarkable for its shock-proof qualities, and acknowledged by the British in the early, pre-Suez days, in some ways higher than their own. Secondly, the British, unlike the Normans of 1066 fame, did not settle in the conquered country, but, as H. G. Wells observed, founded small

Bloomsburies in Calcutta and Bombay, insisting, in the halcyon days of post-Suez, pre-war imperialism, on remaining arrogantly and impenetrably the *sahib*, that is, the foreigner.

The truth of the matter seems to be that the Bengali and the English, severe strangers in appearance, have an inner, a congenital affinity, an affinity which the accidents of history combined to make the best use of. The first contacts took place under extremely happy auspices. Both the Vaishnava romanticism and the Mughal courtliness having declined, Bengal was ready for a spiritual renewal which, at that moment of time, only an impact with the West could produce. The alert Bengali mind, fretting to get out of the rut, was quick to discern the fire of ideas behind the smoke of guns, and it seemed as if the minds of the two peoples, the Bengali and the English, moved to the same rhythmic pattern. Even the opposition of the priest-class has been somewhat exaggerated, or misunderstood ; for Sanskrit learning, for some time past, having been in the main confined to *nyāya*, or logic, it is conceivable that the pundits found nineteenth century European rationalism neither strange nor profane, but really rather acceptable, though they did not care to say so, lest their occupation should be gone. We can now see that the detractors of Vidyasagar lost the day not because of any inherent weakness, but because they did not, at heart, believe in the cause they were championing.

A story is told of an old Brahmin renowned for scholarship who, not knowing a word of English, took the trouble of having one or two of Shakespeare's tragedies verbally translated for him. 'This is what drama should be !' was the judgment of a man who, all his life, had studied nothing but Sanskrit. This predisposition, as we might call it, was nowhere more manifest than in literature : it was the literature of Europe, rather than its physical or social sciences which, for the Bengali mind, had extraordinary, elixir-like qualities. Indeed, the elixir was at first used as an intoxicant, for it was really Shelley and Shakespeare that our ancestors got drunk on, sherry and champagne being merely pretexts. When the western wind first blew, it blew so hard that Michael Madhusudan Datta wasted his rare gifts in the foredoomed enterprise to *become* a Euro-

pean, and rounded up in being, alas, only potentially a great Bengali poet. Other forces, the Brahmo reformation, Isvarchandra Vidyasagar with his great soul, and Vivekananda's organ voice, rose to stem the declamatory enthusiasms of Derozio's disciples ; and as we come to the opening years of the present century, we find Rabindranath so far a master of the European spirit as to be able to write :

Today the West has opened its doors, and many are the bringers of gifts.
They will give and take, they will mingle and commingle ; we shall not
send them back from the universal shores of India. (*Translation mine.*)

By that time, the map of Bengal's transformation could clearly be seen ; our soil had drunk of the literature, the essence of England, and a new literature was born. This is a fact for which I find no parallel, for though the British have cast their nets over half the globe, no other foreign shores have responded to them in this particular fashion. We in Bengal have not adopted the language or the religion of the English, nor (except in so far as imposed by modern living conditions) their clothes or customs ; but their essence we have made our own, and ours it will remain. This, now that they are preparing to depart, is of greater significance than ever before. Despite the British ruling caste's instinctive abhorrence for Bengalis, so ably voiced by Kipling, a result, no doubt, of Bengal's earlier awakening to political consciousness, this undercurrent of sympathy, of spiritual 'mingling and commingling' has persisted in the bitterest hours of strife. The situation, I think, is similar, though only partly, to that of Ireland, politically England's sworn enemy for centuries, unavoidably so, and at the same time the mother of some of the greatest writers in English. In fact, a good number of Bengalis, including some of those who have actively opposed British rule and taken the personal consequences, would be likely to read their own feelings in these words of Yeats : 'How can I hate the English, owing what I do to Shakespeare, Shelley and Blake ?'

Shakespeare, Shelley and Blake, the literature of the English tongue, this, from the beginning, is what England has meant to certain sections of Bengalis, and in the politically disanglicized future, will mean to increasingly larger numbers. This has been an

inspiration in the literal sense ; our literature was in-spirited and renascent. The difference between our earlier literature and the literature written by the imbibers of Western thought, though not a total one like that between *Beowulf* and the *Canterbury Tales*, is at least like that between Chaucer and Shakespeare, or the *Nut-Brown Maid* and Wordsworth. There is a historical continuity, but also a sharp development in the language, a sudden extension in mental frontiers and a vast complexity of form. A new life, and with it a new literature was born in nineteenth century Bengal, as in England of the sixteenth ; and Bengali prose, like English prose in the corresponding period, was newly born.

Midwifed by Rammohan Roy, nursed by Isvarchandra Vidya-sagar, baptized, so to say, by the morning-memorable (as we say in Bengali) Serampore missionaries, the infant thrived, and after a strenuous and brilliant adolescence in Bankimchandra and Kaliprasanna Sinha, came to age in Rabindranath, whose lifelong work has placed it almost on the same level as its more accomplished sister—verse. Almost, but not quite ; for though our prose, in less than a couple of centuries, has achieved remarkable maturity, there are yet notable deficiencies, deficiencies, I mean, not in performance, but in potency itself. The trouble is that the base of the language being Sanskrit, and Sanskrit an inflected language moving on word-compounds and phonetic liaisons, verse, in Bengali, still enjoys certain initial advantages over prose. Though we have for ever got rid of what Madhusudan rightly denounced as ‘slavish imitation of Sanskrit’, and our prose shines naturally in short and simple sentences, yet long and complex ones, with involutions, parentheses and periods are comparatively hard to achieve. Not pestered with too many prepositions, and able to dispense with conjunctions, genders, plurals, articles and often with verbs themselves (sometimes the verb is just left out and sometimes it is better so),* it has an eminently desirable lightness as well as (for one can-

* The one inherent and practically irremediable weakness of Bengali is its lack of verb-roots. This, too, verse can circumvent and even turn to an advantage, but prose has no way out. What we envy English most is its inexhaustible capacity for turning nouns and adjectives, whatever their origin, immediately

not, it seems, have something for nothing) a capacity for looseness that can at times be quite distressing. Another difficulty rises from a certain inadequacy of the vocabulary. While our literary habits remain partly Sanskrit, we have abandoned the study of the language, thus allowing the obsolescence of a good number of abstract words and philosophical terms. For modern concepts, moreover, and all manner of technical terms read, thought and talked of in English, there are no ready-made Bengali equivalents. Bengali prose, therefore, is now all right for description, narration and dialogue, the accessory of fiction and *belles-lettres*, but seems just to fall short of speculative, critical and philosophical writing.

II

It is no wonder that, compared to modern European languages, Bengali, so far, is the poorest in speculative prose. This, I should add, is a poverty in quantity rather than quality. Necessarily small in every language, the quantity is proportionately smaller in ours. Inclination has not been wanting, for Rammohan Roy speculated on the nature of God, and Vidyasagar plunged into social polemics in the absurdly inadequate prose they could command. If there has not been a larger harvest, the reason, as we have seen, is that the language has presented formidable obstacles which our writers, in different ways, have set about to surmount. Rabindranath, still our greatest writer in this branch of literature as in any other, had (at least it seems so) an advantage over his contemporaries in that he could think on an abstract subject without frequent reference to European words which, if one or two grew insistent, he could as well turn to Bengali from familiar Sanskrit roots. It is remarkable to note how scanty, considering the volume and variety of his

into verbs. Bengali is so verb-shy that for a great number of actions we have no choice but to use the root 'to do' or 'to be' after the appropriate nouns, and the writer who wishes to avoid monotony has to have his wits about him all the time. This is the reason why advertisements, slogans and news read either 'translated' or trite in Bengali; but this, perhaps, is just as well.

work, is the number of English words he has allowed to get into print, and how few, considering his powers in this direction, are the new words (I do not mean new compounds and combinations) he has brought forth. That he could write effectively on both technical and abstract subjects without leaning either on English or obsolete Sanskrit words, or on new coinages, is accounted for by his inability to think except in metaphor, which imparted to whatever he wrote a free and spontaneous air. As it was not in him to be matter-of-fact or deliberate even when the occasion so demanded, and his daring, at the same time, took him to subjects not easily within the reach of his language, he had to employ a sort of metaphorical circumlocution, gaining warmth and subtlety at the cost of directness and precision. Pramatha Chaudhuri, on the other hand, incapable of circumlocution, adopted a policy of desanskritization, though himself deeply read in Sanskrit. Breaking up the compounds, and preferring the dressing-gown ease of indigenous and Persian words to the tautness of Sanskritic diction, Pramatha Chaudhuri evolved a modern prose counterpart of Bharatchandra's Sanskro-Persian verse style. Rather than disturb the conversational tone, which he placed above all, by looking for Bengali equivalents, he was content to incorporate the English words themselves. The result has been excellent so far as directness and clarity are concerned, but seriousness has suffered : his allowances for fun, puns and a somewhat indolent vocabulary have probably stood in the way of his being taken as seriously as he should be.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's followers have believed what Rabindranath has never : that writing should be, so far as practicable, an exact transcription of verbal speech. Of less questionable validity is the other Pramathean doctrine that brevity is the soul of wit, practised temperamentally by Atulchandra Gupta and laboriously by Dhurjatiprasad Mukerji, naturally with different results. The former's essays (alas, too few !) are little models of lucidity, while those of the latter are a curious mixture of jittery journalese, brilliant table-talk, intellectual puzzles and genuine profundity. Bent on writing as he would (and, in fact, does) talk, Dhurjatiprasad

gives the impression of a highly cultivated person, quick-witted and glib-tongued, exercising his gifts before a group of Sunday-morning admirer-friends, whom, in his less careful moments, he mistakes for his pupils, himself betaking to the professorial chair to which his occupation has accustomed him. The conversational manner having been carried to excess, indeed, confused with the chatty, the writings, in his case, do not do justice to the author ; and his erudition and discernment are likely to be better appraised by his personal friends than by the readers of his books. With Atulchandra Gupta, the case is the reverse : it seems possible to meet this eminent lawyer socially or professionally and remain ignorant of the fact of his authorship, but impossible to read him and not admire his dry, astringent crispness. The pity is that his life as a writer has been brief : the occupation of law and pre-occupation of politics having conspired in recent years practically to remove him from the field of literature.

Atulchandra Gupta's lucidity is matched by that of Annadasankar Ray, who, being a novelist as well, and a poet moreover, adds to his essays a dramatic vividness and a sensuous rhythm possible only in one used to value words for their own sake. Because of these qualities, rare in combination, Annadasankar, whether in essay or fiction, is one of the best prose-writers in the whole of our literature : he takes full advantage of the brook-like, dancer-like qualities of the language : avoids, like Pramatha Chaudhuri, both Sanskrit and circumlocution, but like Rabindranath, is free with metaphor. Pursuing the ideal of 'thinking like a sage and talking like a child', he has, in reality, acquired a shimmering simplicity which, as Sudhindranath Datta has remarked, is worlds removed from shallowness. The only fault, the one little fault we have to find is that at times his prose shimmers too much, and dances to a rhythm too quick for anything but lyric verse. There is just a risk that the audience, captivated by sets and costumes, might be induced to miss parts of the play.

I am inclined to the opinion that Annadasankar, though not one of the *Sabujpatra* group, and that for no other than chronological reasons, is the only true disciple of Pramatha Chaudhuri in

that he represents the logical development of Pramathean prose. A logical development is one in the right direction, and to insist on a Bharatchandran courtliness in a literature dominated by a Rabindranath, however exhilarating in the beginning, would finally have been a movement in the wrong. Annadasankar, having drawn more on Rabindranath, and much more effectively, than either of his two elder contemporaries mentioned above, was in a better position than either, or any other, to apply Pramathean principles to the changing literary context of the later nineteen-twenties. And this, with Pramatha Chaudhuri working on his conscious mind and Rabindranath far deeper down, he has done with complete success.

A singular figure in our recent speculative prose is Sudhindranath Datta, the poet. *Svagata* (the title, meaning 'Soliloquies', is at once a challenge and a confession), a collection of essays in literary criticism and his only prose book so far, gives the impression that the author, aware like the others of the inequality of the spirit and the medium, the subject-matter and the language, refused, unlike the others, to adopt any evasive, though practically effective strategy, but thought out each sentence completely in English, translating it, almost word for word, into a rich and fabulous Bengali. I say fabulous, for this apparently impossible task he could achieve only by sacrificing lucidity and all manner of 'surface' attraction, by bewildering the reader with Sanskrit words unheard in Bengali, technical terms of Hindu metaphysics, old words in new senses and, finally, words of his own coinage. There is not the least deviation or compromise; the sentences, strained to the utmost for attaining a directness and a precision not natural to Bengali, are in structure as involved and elaborate as they would be in English, though necessarily heavier. But what matter if they grow heavier still? Sudhindranath is out to have all his say: he does not leave out a subject, or a thought, nor even a slight modification of it because it 'just won't go' in Bengali, a form of compromise we can discern in both Pramatha Chaudhuri and Annadasankar.

This prose, produced cerebrally with almost a foreigner's fastidiousness might, in effect, appear to be the work of a highly

gifted European who has taken the trouble of studying first Sanskrit and then Bengali, and the additional trouble of speaking out his mind on European and Bengali literatures in the comparatively insufficient language of the latter. But this is only appearance, for in reality Sudhindranath, as in his verse, blends a rigidly Sanskrit diction with common spoken idioms some of which cannot even be suggested in English. This blending vitalizes his work but by no means relaxes the tension of thought. What makes his prose look 'foreign' is that, unlike his verse, it is untraditional ; neither Pramatha Chaudhuri whom he ardently admires, nor Rabindranath whom, this side idolatry, he worships, is its moulder or starting point, or if so, he has concealed the fact so well as to make a complete denial. He gives us a new prose, or a new mode of prose, sombre, ponderous, of a compactness not known before, an enhancer, we might say, not only of the potency of our language, but also our own capacity for abstract thinking. For language modifies thought as much thought organizes language ; the more words we have, and the more variously we learn to use them, the better we can think. Bengali, as I have already implied, is in its present stage practically debarred from certain abstract subjects : Sudhindranath, at least, has shown a way. It is a way he has found, but not traversed ; he has worked hard to forge new implements but not long enough to devise new means. Here and there in his prose we come upon sparks to ignite our mind, exquisite, memorable, quotable phrases and sentences ; yet on the whole he makes us wrestle too much, sends us too often to the more voluminous dictionaries, confounds us too frequently with an almost mathematical compression ; and although the few who have submitted themselves to the hardship of unravelling him have been amply repaid, the great majority of readers have not been disposed to follow suit. Some other writer or writers, it is likely, will, in the near future, use him as a base, modify, extend and adapt this new mode so as to combine its advantages with the primary quality of ease which Sudhindranath admires but lacks. He would have done it himself if, like Atulchandra Gupta, he had not practically abandoned writing.

In modern times poetry and criticism often go together ; a

poet, when he writes prose at all, writes it beautifully and seems naturally inclined to philosophical speculation. There are, of course, notable exceptions to both, as well as cases where the criticism gets the better of the poetry. Of this last, an illustrious example in English literature is Matthew Arnold and in our own Mohitlal Majumdar, who swears by Arnold, but neither imitates his sweetness of style nor accepts his definition of culture. Mohitlal's critical prose, greater in quantity than his verse, has both substance and form, but being handicapped with a certain pugnaciousness, a rather provincial insolence, often lets down the cause it is championing. Though a formidable prose-writer, endowed with a more genuine passion for literature than many of his antagonists, Mohitlal is unfortunately enthralled by precisely that aspect of our nineteenth century renaissance which, today, deserves nothing but denial : I mean the milltaristic Hindu nationalism, corresponding to the angry righteousness of Luther and Cromwell. This has imposed on him serious cultural limitations, besides giving a chronic bad temper, so that his critical faculties have served him but ill, making of him the ablest spokesman of obscurantism.

I have taken the essayists first because, generally speaking, they work more consciously (not necessarily self-consciously) than the novelists, and in any case, it is advisable to go to the essayists (sometimes they are poets or poet-novelists at the same time) for the highest levels of prose. I do not mention our other writers of non-fictional prose—writers on history, archæology, politics, prosody and so on—some of them eminently readable—for I wish to confine my attention to those whom I would call 'pure' writers as opposed to 'applied' writers ; in other words, to those who write not primarily to impart instruction or convey information, but as practitioners of an art whose validity, apart from the value of the content, they recognize.

III

I must, at this stage, mention *Kallol*, chronologically the most important literary periodical after *Sabujpatra*, the two being similar

in results and different in methods. *Kallol*, like *Sabujpatra* of a decade ago, served as an instrument of a new spirit (in their respective times *the* new spirit) in literature ; but while the latter was well-planned and better manned, having been, in the beginning, controlled nearly as much by Rabindranath as Pramatha Chaudhuri, it was more or less an accident that the former became what, in its final phase, it was. Starting as a four-anna story-magazine, *Kallol* took a more serious turn through the influence of Gokulchandra Nag, who, having written one long novel and a few short stories where talent strove with the latest fashions, died young, leaving *Kallol* to the care of its founder-editor, Dineshramjan Das, an elderly bachelor, pleasant and sociable, endowed with a great gift for making friends. This gift, I think, was at least partly responsible for *Kallol's* somewhat sudden ascension, for in about a couple of years from Gokulchandra's death, those of us who were serving our literary nonage in the middle and late twenties had all gathered round *Kallol*, drawn as much by one another as by the conviviality of DR, as the dear editor liked to be called. While *Sabujpatra* influenced its contributors. Rabindranath not excepted, *Kallol* was influenced by its contributors to such an extent as to soon become their mouthpiece, and identified with the spirit of youth, with revolt, and even the revolting.

Kallol assembled, in its pages as well as its rooms in a little lane off Harrison Road, nearly every young writer of the day, some too young, and some, as was soon seen, not really writers, along with comparatively older men like Nazrul Islam and Dhurjatiprasad Mukerji. Most of our authors now hovering between the years of forty and fifty either belonged or were partial to it, there being but two notable exceptions. Sudhindranath Datta was not heard of till two years after *Kallol's* extinction, when he started yet another literary movement in *Parichay*, wherein appeared Amiya Chakravarty's first remarkable poems. *Parichay* worked very well till Sudhindranath tired, which he soon did, and till then was the most intelligent review we had ever had, best informed, and most in touch with the world. Critical rather than creative, *Parichay* set up a remarkably high standard in book-reviewing, as

yet unequalled, but introduced us to no new writers outside the editor himself and, in a more restricted sense, Bishnu Dey. Amiya Chakravarty was never connected with *Parichay* except as a casual contributor.

What with one thing and another, *Kallol*, though its peak point extended over no more than three years, justified its name (the word means 'rumble') in making a greater noise than any periodical after *Subujpatra*. I now wonder that we of the *Kallol*-clan, then so young and tentative, should have been taken so seriously ; and I conclude that our first efforts, despite youthful excesses, did reveal a new world, that though we sometimes succumbed to the temptation of shocking and showing off, our sincerity was manifest. Adolescent rebels, we derided Rabindranath's peace and swooned in ecstasy over his lines, reciting them in chorus in hot streets and cheap restaurants, and murmuring them alone in bed at night ; we read Whitman, the Russians and the Scandinavians ; we demanded a freer atmosphere, a greater eclecticism in diction and form, including verse technique ; we praised, unlike Wordsworth, what man has made of man, that is, himself, claiming that man is noble in his unremitting struggle with the brute nature within him, not because he wins, for he may not, but simply because he struggles. I do not mean that these ideas were clearly formulated or, except occasionally, successfully applied, but the trend of thought was there, unmistakably, insistently there. As is usual in such cases, some acclaimed it while many were horrified, the degree of horror being characteristically voiced by a lady who, perhaps imagining that men write books as soon as they are born, once regretted that a certain young writer had not been 'liquidated' at his birth. This infanticidal lady was followed by others of a more realistic turn of mind, releasing torrents of ridicule and slander which we thought rather fun and the prudent wanted to stop. Some well-meaning and optimistic persons, themselves outside any literary circle, appealed for arbitration to Rabindranath, who was finally persuaded to preside over a conciliatory meeting. Two sessions were held at the Jorasanko house, the two 'parties' as well as the neutrals strongly represented, and Rabindranath, for

whom the occasion of the meeting could mean but little, spoke in his flute-like voice on fundamental principles, later developing his remarks into two essays entitled 'The Form of Literature' and 'Literary Criticism', which produced a fresh controversy, and one so confused and confusing that the hoped-for conciliation looked remoter than ever. Prominent among Rabindranath's opponents was Nareshchandra Sengupta, a Doctor of Law, who at that time was causing some furore with his valiant novels about criminal morbidity. Rabindranath, however, soon left the field, perhaps deciding that example was better than precept. His *Śeṣer Kavita*, written about this time, and his first novel after *Gharé-Bāiré* (there is an interval of twelve years between the two), came upon us with a splendour and wonder which we who were then young can never forget. The years have revealed that *Śeṣer Kavita* is an extremely weak novel, if a novel it is. Perhaps, really, it is a prose poem in a new form, employing both prose and verse, and whatever its intrinsic depreciation, its historical importance remains. *Śeṣer Kavita* is historically important in not only Rabindranath's own work, but in the whole of our literature, and though its specific influence has not been unquestionable, landing some writers in fanciful, if not fantastic inversions of verbs and nouns, the book itself is written in a Pavlova-like prose, Pound's 'gilded Pavlova' turned gold, entirely its own justification to be, entirely untranslatable. It seems that Rabindranath, seeing that the rebels of *Kallol* could not perceive the true direction of their movement, much less practise accordingly, threw up *Śeṣer Kavita*, half in jest perhaps, to demonstrate to the fledglings what they were really up to. At any rate, we of the *Kallol* felt that here, so far as prose was concerned, Rabindranath had done what we all the time had been trying to do, done it, what is more, to a dream-like perfection, wherein we read that our dim strivings had not been altogether in vain. This indirect, I might say inverse influence of the *Kaloleans* on Rabindranath, is perceptible in much of the work of his last ten years, for often does he enter the world of his youngest contemporaries, if only to correct their doctrines and teach them the truth.

In spite, however, of Rabindranath's personal intervention, the baiting of the Kalloleans continued, reaching, some five years after the Jorasanko meeting, a sort of consummation in state action directed against 'obscurity'. Four novels by three different authors were put under ban,* and a bonfire made of the existing copies, a confirmation, crudely ostentatious perhaps, of what till then was only provisional : the fact that the new spirit was not to be exorcized from the body of Bengali literature.

IV

Immediately preceding the *Kallol* group in prose fiction, and serving them first as a model and then as anathema, is Manindralal Bose, a kind of prose poet, a writer of indolent, ornamental prose, heavily fragrant, slowly persuasive. The first of the younger novelists to part ways with Saratchandra, not interested in adolescents, prostitutes or cantankerous old females, he introduces us to heliotrope saris, moonlight-complexioned women playing the *Moonlight Sonata*, and tall, consumptive platonists listening to it. This moderately exotic paraphernalia he uses to conjure a sweet, languid atmosphere, and in him the atmosphere seems to matter above all else. This, I hasten to add, does not mean that he is, or wants to be, in any way like Tchekhov : for his atmosphere is a decoration into which he does his best to fit in a 'plot', whereas in the incomparable Russian the atmosphere *is* the story. Lingerings illnesses being

* One of my own having thus been honoured, I may take the liberty of recording an anecdote. Finding that the writing of books had earned me the embarrassing attention of police spies, I sought succour with one of the most celebrated barristers of the day, too busy, of course, and too successful a man to have any time for reading. 'But what did you write about ?' he inquired, as we were driving together to the police headquarters where he was to negotiate for a 'settlement' : 'Merely about love.' I replied. 'Love between unmarried young persons.' 'What !' cried my defendant, fairly jumping up in his seat. 'Love between unmarried young persons ! Who put such stuff in your head ? Do you think Tolstoy ever wrote about this ? Or Dostoevsky ?' I cite this as an example of that spiritual impenetrability which, perhaps, is common to the 'general public' in all countries.

eminently suitable for Manindralal's type of decoration, his pages have a high incidence of tuberculosis, and his inalienable fascination for the disease made it for some time actually extremely fashionable. The earlier Kallioleas were infected, the poor Gokulchandra in a more than literary sense. His death, perhaps, diminished the tubercular enthusiasms of the survivors ; also from more relevant sources came the realization that the febrile flush was not enough. There was a recoil from Manindralal, a turning from pianos and patients to rags and scars ; and in some the blood of Saratchandra danced to a new rhythm.

Premendra Mitra and Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, often mentioned together, are jointly and severally admired for having extended the frontiers of our fiction. Sailajananda, the elder and more profuse of the two first noted for the coal-mine sketches of his native Birbhum, Bengal's miniature Midlands, has written, in his best with supreme success, about the poorer people ('classes' is hardly the word here) only recently seduced from agriculture by expanding industry. The most detached writer ever to be born in Bengal, he, like Maupassant, tells his story with minimum description and comment, and without divagations, whether delectable or distressing. In a particular sense, the writer is throughout absent in his work, for he never utters a word to predispose us ; the characters move, talk and act, revealing themselves and the story, and producing in our minds the appropriate emotional and moral reactions. We have a feeling that the story tells itself ; or rather that the story tells of the author instead of the author telling the story ; and it is not until we have finished reading that we can stop a moment to admire, even remember him. Naturally, Sailajananda writes simply. I should say plainly, in little sentences and diminutive paragraphs, more with instinct than intellect, without, I suspect, knowing or even intending the effect he is going to produce. There is nothing brilliant about him ; he is slow, seems slow-witted ; he is quiet and seems indifferent. This is why, I think, he has not been spoken of enough, nor his virtues sufficiently praised, his virtue of balance, of undisturbed tempo, and of freedom from temptation : the temptation to bring tears or make converts. This

last, it may be argued, is an immunity rather than a freedom, for he is congenitally incapable of being thus tempted, and these temptations, if so they are, may lead to desirable results. Yes, they may do so, but often do not ; and so many times in our literature, in Bankimchandra, Saratchandra and later celebrities, have we seen them do exactly the opposite that we are happy to find one who is immune, and it matters little if, for this favour, we have to thank the author's author instead of the author.

Premendra resembles Sailajananda definitely only in this that his earlier stories were about derelicts and delinquents. At the same time, however, as he was at work on such outspoken titles as *Mud* or *The Nameless Harbour*, he was also writing about the wiles of the God of Five Arrows, as Hindus call their Cupid. His 'proletarian' phase did not last long, and while it did, was tempered by the poetry in him, and since poetry tends to translate the local into the universal, he sought, no doubt rightly, such new fields as would offer better opportunities for this translation.

Sailajananda is of a piece, definite, at times downright ; his range is small and curiosity limited. Premendra, on the other hand, moves freely up and down in society, is responsive to various psychological types, including certain pathological ones, loves insinuation and mystery, half-lights and shadowy conclusions. He prefers questions to statements, and monologue to either drama or narration ; he makes the utmost use, in a way that must be surprising to Jibanananda of *Grey Manuscript*, of mists and all that is dim and dusty-grey ; the word 'perhaps' occurs in him with perhaps—no, *not* perhaps, but positively a disconcerting frequency. These characteristics have equipped him for two distinct types of fiction : scientific romances, remarkable for plotcraft, which could have compared with those of Wells if Premendra had intended them for adults instead of juveniles ; and stories of psychology, delicate and sinuous, or of pure atmosphere, depending on, not Manindralalean luxury, but a mild and rather attractive perversity. The two types are strictly apart : he has never, for instance, written a story like Aldous Huxley's 'The Gioconda Smile' where plot mingles with psychology ; his exciting accounts of devilish doctors and inter-

planetary journeys have no moral implications ; and his abnormals are too gentlemanly to give us the creeps. Husbands wanting to get rid of their wives seem to be playing an unusual and a slightly dangerous game ; they are neither victims nor the source of the horror, the sudden despairing horror of

Nobody knows what he's likely to do

Until there's somebody he wants to get rid of

in Eliot's *The Family Reunion*. Premendra's characters are all lovable, even when they are cunning or border on insanity ; the truly evil is outside him, we might even say outside our literature, this being a trait inherited from Sanskrit and strengthened by the Vaishnavas with their gospel that 'man, above all, is the truth and there is no higher'. In European literature, as Aldous Huxley has repeatedly observed, the portrayal of evil is preponderatingly more frequent than of the good, and artistically far more satisfying ; but Bengali, and probably as a whole Indian literature after the *Mahabharata*, shows a remarkable lack of interest in the actively bad or the genuinely destructive.* The attitude is well represented by Rabindranath who, in a significant passage in *My Reminiscences*, implicitly disapproves 'the frenzy of Romeo and Juliet's love, the fury of King Lear's impotent lamentations, the all-consuming fire of Othello's jealousy', and gently reproves his contemporaries of youth for their Shakespearean intoxication. His rebuke to those of his countrymen who had 'gained more of stimulation than nourishment out of English literature' is rightly administered ; yet it would have been better for our literature if, at any time in his life, Rabindranath had prayed for Yeats's 'old man's frenzy', the passion of Lear, Timon and Blake. This passion, which is the cause of the greater competence in the portrayal of evil we notice in European literature, and up to a stage, a direct expression of life-force, never found a

* A case in point is Saratchandra's gallery of the ugly, those wretched and all too human conspirators, hungrily gloating over the prospect of a square meal or a fresh scandal, and finally falling on the mercy of those whom they would victimize. Incidentally, the good is correspondingly mild in Saratchandra : confined, like Jane Austen, to the world of family ties and social relationship, he shares with Jane Austen a capacity to portray goodness in the worldly sense of good nature, but not in the other-worldly sense of virtue.

place in either classical Sanskrit literature or the ballads and lyrics of our middle ages, nor, till very lately, in Bengali literature.

Even now, however, our writers have much less difficulty in portraying the adult and intelligent virtuous, and much less capacity to depict wickedness which Aldous Huxley rightly attributes to Dickens, Sterne and Shakespeare, and we, no less rightly, may attribute to Aldous Huxley and other modern Europeans.* Sailajanda, in this respect a remarkable exception, is so far our only author who has succeeded in creating scoundrels, not Pramatha Chaudhuri's delightful ones, but perfectly infernal scoundrels. Avarice, debauchery, sadistic cruelty and maddening hypocrisy—he has a relentless, almost a suffocating grip over all, and his work is without catharsis, whether of laughter or tragic catastrophe. His quietness, as he does his job, is terrible; his description of a murder as unconcerned as that of a mother suckling her child; he does not care to condemn or punish, punish with defeat or condemn to remorse; or perhaps he feels that the rage, the furious rage he rouses in the reader is punishment enough. This coolness, we might say cold-bloodedness, contrasts him again with

* The recent European experiment with virtue is noteworthy; perhaps for the first time in English literature, we are meeting characters whom the authors mean to be good without being puerile or comical. The first results indicate that the experiment will have to be long. How unconvincing, for instance, is the Hinduized young American in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* or the Italian mystic in Aldous Huxley's brilliant *Time Must Have a Stop*; and how vivid, how intensely living by contrast are sensualists and social climbers that crowd those pages! Goodness, as portrayed in these books, is an abnormality, a kind of near-saintliness which simply cannot be reconciled with normal human living. This notion we in India find rather strange, for it is not in us to think that one must eat little and read much or be poor and a celibate in order to be good. To us, goodness is something simple and natural; one may have it and give it out while living to the full the life of the world, or *Saṁsāra*. A fine example is Anandamayee in Rabindranath's *Gora*, a married and middle-aged woman, with little book-learning and no other occupation than that of housewife, and completely, intelligently, adultly good. Anandamayee, who teaches us that goodness is happiness, is, so far as my knowledge goes, matched in European literature only by Alyosha Karamazov but for the fact that he is a monk. Yeats's Bengali doctor was wrong: refusal to live is not, in India, obligatory to saintliness; and perhaps *saṁsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not as utterly irreconcilable in the East as in the West.

Premendra Mitra who, after Saratchandra, is our most accomplished heart-warmer.

V

Premendra, who represents two types of fiction, also belong to two countries of the mind, being in one a neighbour of Sailajananda and in the other of Achintyakumar Sengupta, an energetic and determined writer, of greater sweep and boldness and, unlike either of the other two, uninterrupted activity. His first novel was also Premendra's first, the two young collaborators seeming for some time mutually complementary in their independent works. Both wrote a playful, wistful, hide-and-seek prose ; both had a peculiar weakness for the present indefinite tense, no doubt a Scandinavian influence,* and a rather unfortunate one. I say unfortunate, for this form of speech, meant for occasional lyrical ripples impedes, if used throughout, the continuity of narration, and an indiscriminate adoption of it may produce simply unreadable prose, as has happened in the case of so many of our minor writers.

This phase, however, was soon over in both Premendra and Achintyakumar. They developed two distinct styles, they glimpsed two different horizons : the adolescent partnership was over. All our talk of similarities between contemporary authors is, after all, superficial and arbitrary, admitted for the sake of mere convenience ; for no two authors, though initially belonging to the same movement or the same historical group think, feel or write in the same way. They may resemble clearly, even strikingly, in the beginning ; but the farther they go, and the further they grow, the more they must diverge. Remarkably, this is more true of recent literature than that of the past : passages in Elizabethan plays, stanzas in seventeenth century English verse or our own

* Achintyakumar Sengupta translated Knut Hamsun, on whom, to a great degree, he modelled his style in that typical *Kallol* product, his first independent novel, *Bédé* ('The Vagrant'), a beaker full of warm youth, froth bubble and all.

Vaishnava lyrics are sometimes so similar in tone and texture as to seem of interchangeable authorship, and in particular cases it is indeed difficult to judge from internal evidence whether a passage or a whole poem is by Lovelace or Suckling, or by Govindadasa or Jnanadasa, a situation extremely favourable to would be Ph. D.'s and other literary labourers. The rise of individualism, leading to a greater and richer individuality in spheres of thought, combined with extensive and intensive printing, has abolished this degree-bestowing literary communism : Wordsworth is as different from Coleridge as Shelley from Keats ; and it is clear that Keats and Wordsworth or Byron and Coleridge lack affinity to the point of antipathy. These Bengali authors have as much and as little in common as the English romantics.

Today, after more than twenty years of authorship, Achintyakumar and Premendra are widely apart. The Norwegian manner (or mannerism) has led the former to a bouncing prancing style, rather hard, at times harsh, but never lacking ardour, while the latter it has left enmeshed in a sighing, whispering perhaps. If Premendra had been more of contemplative, and less a lover of physical adventure, he might have fared forth into dark Tchehovian realms ; but his schoolboyish vivaciousness, his sense of 'fun' has never deserted him, so that escaping Achintyakumar's harshness, he has also missed his more adult vigour. This vigour, it is true, often turns to violence ; violent emotions, violent language, a violation of nature and native idioms ; and the pugilistic prose of Achintyakumar's maturity is easy to find fault with. So strange, indeed, can his prose be, so bewilderingly a motley of Sanskrit, Persian and dialect, of multiple adjectives and staggering hyperboles that it once elicited the following press comment : 'Mr. Achintyakumar Sengupta is a celebrated Bengali author. We should be grateful if his works are translated into Bengali.' As he never seems to be quite free from a certain over-emphasis, a marked tendency to 'over-colouring' (our Bengali word for exaggeration), and sometimes chokes the reader with incomprehensible provincialisms, it is no wonder that, now and then, he irritates his best admire. But we must not let his faults blind us to his no less

obvious qualities : his vividness, his variety, his wide range of sympathy, and the excellent use he occasionally makes of dialect. The obligations of a Government appointment have taken him to different parts of the country, and to a world immeasurably different from Calcutta where his youth was spent : a world of pompous officials whom he does well to laugh at ; of peasants, artisans and knavish litigants whom he loses no time in putting in his books. His experience as an official has no doubt provided him with a subject-matter at once new and pregnant ; and if, instead of using it up as it came, he had waited for the integration of the experience, the results would have been proportionate to the possibilities. As it is, he seems content to mix up the art of fiction with the 'pep' of reportage, anxious to be topical, and a trifle conscious that he has rather a lot to write home about, 'home' here meaning those who know little of Bengal outside Calcutta. This, however, is not a remark I mean as final, or relevant to more than one particular phase, for Achintyakumar Sengupta has already passed through so many phases, written successively about so many social sections and on so many subjects, often with skill and always with gusto, in each case imprinting his signature, that the future may, and I hope does, hold for him other stages of development leading to a perfect organization of his abilities.

VI

I do not know what the matter is with us in Bengal : whether it is the climate or bad education, or the improbability of earning one's living as a writer, involving material waste and spiritual frustration, or an unwillingness to exert ourselves ; or that our specifically Bengali tradition is not long or firm enough to give us the necessary sustenance : whatever the cause, the fact of the matter is that many of our authors pass their lives with little or only a little organization of their talents, and many, too many of them, even of the few who do not belong to the above category, cease, once past their prime, to write either anything worthwhile or altogether.

Unlike modern Europeans who do succeed in becoming, completely and incontrovertibly, what they were constitutionally meant to be, a Wells a super-journalist, a Yeats a great poet, and continue the process without remission or relaxation throughout the waning years and right up to death, our writers, on the whole, seem to lack the supreme gift of using their gifts, Rabindranath being unique in this respect, as in every other. A writer who does not even recognize the necessity of organization is Prabodhkumar Sanyal, rather like Saratchandra in this that his acquirements fall far short of his endowments. I will hazard the remark that Saratchandra's all but inescapable influence has induced in our later novelists an excessive reliance on what is vaguely known as 'experience' or 'life'. The fact, at any rate, is that, generally speaking, our poets take more trouble over what they write, and a greater and more vital interest in books and abstract thought than those who write nothing but fiction or mainly fiction. What is more, our best prose-writers are in many cases poets as well, whereas the 'unmixed' novelists do not seem to care *how* they write, perhaps believing, in a sense different from Hamlet's, that the play is the thing. It is well to remember here that Hamlet's remark is balanced by Bottom's rehearsals, and Shakespeare laughs heartily at the notion of having a lantern for the moon and the same person playing both the lion and the nightingale. In other words, a play produced with inept actors and poor stage-equipment will not, with the best of intentions, do its work. Translated in terms of literature, this means that a story, of whatever intrinsic interest, will not get itself effectively told, if impeded by bad grammar and dead words. Our 'unmixed' novelists, on the whole, do not seem to mind these faults half as much as they should.

Though I place these remarks where I do, Prabodhkumar Sanyal is one of Nature's own prose-writers, effortless and unhesitant. Nature, however, if we are to get the best out of it, has to be directed and even conquered, a fact this writer in his gay insouciance has consistently neglected to notice. The result is that his prose flows well, but often aimlessly ; he has a ready pen but few fields of operation ; he knows how to write, but is rather at a loss

what to write about. Fortunately, he is a tireless traveller, and his wanderings in the less accessible parts of India having provided him with as 'ready' a subject as his pen, he has given some of his best in travel-tales. The pleasures of care-free wayfaring are in his novels, too ; and finding construction irksome and conclusions elusive, he has found a way out in the glamour of 'unusual' subjects, much favouring that of 'free' love. Meaning and perhaps meant to be original, he is, in effect, often conspicuously startling.

VII

Woman, wrote Rabindranath in a poem of his youth, is half the creation of God, and half of man's desire. An artist, similarly, is partly God's creation and partly his own. With this important difference, however, that while a woman exists subjectively in man's desire, what an artist makes of himself is an objective reality. His value, ultimately, must depend on what he is able to make of his free and rare gift of talent. The degree of talent cannot be measured ; its nature is indefinable and subject to infinite variations ; we can only appraise its product, the work of the artist, moulded as much by the hand of God as his own. There has been in our literature so much of unfulfilled promise, of unrealized hope and premature withering that it is indeed time to assert that talent is not enough ; that nature, when it favours somebody with an exceptional power, expects the favoured to reciprocate with devotion ; that, in fact, devotion is a condition of the gift. I have in mind as I write this the unfinished Premendra (I mean unfinished in both the senses of duration and excellence), the rocket-like flashes of Samar Sen and Subhash Mukhopadhyay, but more specially two of our writers of fiction (and of nothing but fiction), the two prospective successors to Saratchandra, Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay. Tarasankar first appeared in *Kallol*, but has come to prominence much later, and to eminence only during the war years, having produced in that period a larger number of novels, and longer ones, than any other author. He is a

'region' novelist, his country being the same Birbhum as Sailajanda's, but not the same ; for his world, like Saratchandra's, is of the old agricultural order, peopled with impoverished barons, Europe-despising Brahmins, dim-souled peasants, besides such picturesque anachronisms as 'witches', gipsies and hereditary brigands. Some of his most animated pages describe the life of the lowest, the nondescript castes, half-outcastes really, who have never quite fitted in the framework of Hindu society, being irrepressible bohemians : men and women with wild blood and strange professions, itinerant acrobats, peregrinating prostitutes, wandering bands of dancers, the untutored, extemporizing, vagabond poet. This world of vagrancy, of a wider range than Saratchandra's or Prabodhkumar's, and not at all the bohemia of Achintyakumar's youth, is new in our fiction, physically, scenically new, out of which Tarasankar could have made the most beautiful books, if he had chosen to work hard and long on one instead of hurrying through too many. As it is, his old Bengal, like Priestley's old England, is new only in the sense of unfamiliar ; it is morally conventional and psychologically poor ; his Birbhum exists only in time and place, and not, like Hardy's Wessex, in eternity. His novels are as rambling as the protagonists, loose, desultory picaresques, often giving the impression of an author's notes rather than the finished product ; they are as rich in material as shocking in the waste of it ; not novels, strictly speaking, but only material for novels. In perfect contrast to Prabodhkumar, Tarasankar has a lot to write about, but does not seem to know how to write. The trouble with him is that he prefers, in a sense not dreamt of by Keats, sensation to thought : he is well-stocked in facts, but rather in the manner of Juliet's nurse ; he observes, but cannot judge ; he visualizes well, but has no vision. His vocabulary is lean and provincial ; he is soaked in cliché ; he quotes 'Casabianca' (as well as its Bengali counterpart) quite reverentially ; he victimizes the reader with awful platitudes. His short stories, however, with some of which, we hope, he will be able to face posterity, are often free from these specific faults, for the form debars many of them, and compels him, despite his inclinations to the contrary, to keep more or less

to the stricter path of cohesion. It is a great pity that Tarasankar, ceaselessly productive, has of late been insisting on writing nothing but long novels, increasingly giving one the curious feeling of having been admitted into a theatre by daytime when a rehearsal is on. The stage is bare, the light is grey, the actors are in everyday clothes and do not yet know their lines ; there is much commotion and more confusion. One is vaguely interested, one wonders how soon the play will be ready ; one does not care to stay too long. The metaphor has been overworked, but is useful ; for in this case one rather fears that the play will never be ready.

Another respect I find Tarasankar lacking in is what our Sanskrit aestheticians called the *ādirasa* or the primary feeling (though 'feeling' is not quite the word, *rasa* being untranslatable) : I mean the mutual attraction of the two sexes, capable of infinite forms, but invariable in substance ; the subject, totally or partly, of so large, so overwhelmingly large a body of the world's literature. Except here and there in his short stories and in one rather exceptional novel, Tarasankar either does not mention the subject or treats it extremely perfunctorily, both the frequency and the degree of interest being altogether disproportionate in one at once so prolific and given to enthusiasms. Though literature can affect us in various ways, and by multiple means, the old Hindus were no doubt right in naming love (as it is technically called in the modern world) the first of our sources of aesthetic emotion ; and when an author, in novel after novel, appears insensitive, one does miss something akin to salt. At least I do.

Manik Bandyopadhyay with his first four or five volumes convinced us that he was about the most completely equipped writer in fiction we had ever had. A belated Kallolean,* he looked like being the last and the best sequence in the process of change our fiction had just been going through, the point of crystallization following the ferment. We saw in him the froth subside, the passion of youth controlled by a marvellous maturity, the boldness of a

* Though of *Kallol* in spirit, very much so, his work, by some strange chance, never appeared in its pages, and he caught up with the Kalloleans only after *Kallol* had stopped.

rebel balanced by an artist's sense of proportion. We found in him both the rhythm and the impulsion of energy ; a dramatic, impersonal, almost intangible style : in his novel of East Bengal boatmen the most beautiful use of dialect in our literature ; in his *Marionette Legend* a unity generally rare in long novels, more particularly ours. We found him, much more than Premendra, at home in all sections of the society and with a great variety of psychological types, his range equalled by his intensity and both given significance by a thought-pattern. His East Bengal rivers were much more than a novel setting, they were another horizon of the mind ; his villages, described in universal terms, were yet clear in every local feature ; his poorer people were not what the richer thought of them ; his illiterates did not think the thoughts of the writer. He had both virtuosity and vision ; he was both logical and magical ; he seemed to be wanting in nothing, and we thought that there was none like him, none.

In the above paragraph I have throughout used the past tense, and that for the good reason that the writer referred to in it does not any longer exist. The disaster that has overtaken Manik Bandyopadhyay is as unequivocal as that which befell the later Wordsworth. As unequivocal, but many times more lamentable, for our novelist has gone down after only a few years of fruitful activity, and down, what is more not merely into dull stagnation, but right into the depths of degeneracy. When the first disconcerting symptoms began to appear in the form of a clandestine, 'dirty-little-secret'-ish treatment of sex against which D. H. Lawrence so rightly raged, we hoped that his excellent mental constitution will soon expel the virus, but hoped vainly. Probably predisposed to the disease, he let it grow so fast that soon he was writing nothing except about neurotics and sexual perverts. To describe even normal sexual behaviour, let alone perversions, to describe it, that is, not technically scientifically, but in terms of universal human experience and in the language of imaginative writing, it is necessary to have either the devastating laughter of a Voltaire, or the almost religious passion of a D. H. Lawrence, or abundant, overflowing poetry. Manik Bandyopadhyay being constitutionally debarred

from all three, and obsessed less with sex than its aberrations, his more recent work reads like little manuals of sex-psychology or the case-histories of maniacs. Like the great quantities of verse and fiction (if we must call them so) being written in Bengal at the moment merely to illustrate some particular political doctrine, Manik Bandyopadhyay's sex stories are illustrations of psycho-pathological cases, rendered, of course, with great skill. But the greater the skill, the greater, in such cases, the danger ; the greater the skill, the more difficult to realize that one is in the wrong : the greater the skill, the easier to delude oneself and vitiate others. The results, in this particular case, are exemplary. Manik Bandyopadhyay has lost interest in character, action, psychology ; he observes, no longer, alas, various psychological types, but only various types of neuroses ; to him, now, the thesis is the thing, and men and women are no more than indispensable symbols. Inevitably, much of this illustrative writing is not technically literature, but technical 'literature', merely.

The disaster could be averted, and the artist at least continue, if not develop, if, like Boccaccio and Bharatchandra, or Kalidasa and Shakespeare in their youth. Manik Bandyopadhyay had chosen to be 'obscene' in the sense this word is commonly misused, that of erotic. The ancient civilizations as well as Europe of the Renaissance and India till the British came saw nothing obscene in erotic writing, nothing *off scena* or unpresentable ; and in this respect, certainly, they showed better sense than our modern world where the identification of the erotic and the obscene has produced a major aesthetic confusion. In every civilized country there are periodic crusades against obscenity, meaning erotic, or seemingly erotic tendencies in art, while vulgarity, the truly and literally obscene, is tolerated, condoned and even called for. Obscenity, at its worst, is bad form ; vulgarity is bad taste. Obscenity may be a symptom of decadence, historical, but not necessarily literary decadence ; it may also be a result of exuberance, of sheer high spirits. Vulgarity, on the other hand, wherever and whenever it occurs, is begotten by dullness upon discourtesy. Manik Bandyopadhyay, if he had it in him to be classically obscene, could have escaped

that modern fiend, the arch-fiend of vulgarity whose attentions he invited by wanting to describe purely psychopathic reactions, while retaining the interest of imaginative writing. My objection is not merely that his episodes are coarse and brutal in the reading, but more fundamental : they lack life and humanity ; what he is talking about is sex in the raw, not the real, but a hypothetical sex, not the complex, multiform experience of men and women, but bleak concupiscence surgically evacuated of delight and wonder and even animal warmth. All is dull, cold and dead, dead as female breasts 'clammy with sweat, like spongy rubber ball', and cold as the shudder they send down our spine, and also, we feel, that of the male moron in the story. Now it is a maniac instead of a moron, a libertine instead of a lout, criminality instead of imbecility ; — but whatever it is, it is cold, dead cold, cold as a corpse.

VIII

Two of our writers in fiction, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Annadasankar Ray, seem each in his way to have given the best they are capable of. Bibhutibhushan's career is singular in this that he leapt from obscurity to the height of fame with one novel, *Pather Pāñchālī* ('The Ballad of the Road'), an idyll of village life, and one of the few completely satisfying Bengali novels. *Pather Pāñchālī* certainly merited its rewards ; and though its success has never been repeated despite the author's strenuous activity in later years, it is only right that he should be garlanded, if to meet the claim of that book alone. For it is a book of great beauty, the beauty of childhood and old age, of furrows and flowers of distances, and of innocence. The main protagonists are two children, a sister and a brother, two tiny incarnations of eternity, giving their moment of life to winds and waters, while taking from them their timeless significance. Neither Saratchandra's conspiratorial crookedness nor Tarasankar's processional clangour has any place in Bibhutibhushan's village : his characters are simple and incidents common : there is nothing unusual or out of the way, and nothing

commonplace or trivial or dull. This achievement, I think, we owe entirely to his awareness of Nature which Saratchandra and some later novelists remarkably lack : Bibhutibhushan, alone among our 'unmixed' novelists, is a lover of Nature, as great an one as Jibanananda Das, though without the poet's nostalgia, his being the serene love of a naturalist, of one who has lived with buds and birds and is able to name each tree seen from the window of a railway carriage. Because of this easy access into a non-human, non-temporal world, we have in much of his work a sense of space, I do not mean space in the physical sense. for his range is small, but in the sense of an inner freedom, a sustained feeling that the little world we are reading about is the world itself. At least this is so with *Pather Pāñchālī*. reading which one makes what I think is an important discovery : that in Bengal it is still possible for an artist to be at once innocent and intelligent.

This extremely fortunate mental composition (we may call it composure) has enabled Bibhutibhushan to steer clear of the triple temptation of Bengali literature : patriotism (in those debased forms where it becomes either jingoism or provincialism), reformist zeal (leading to journalistic tantrums) and pathology (popularly known as psychology). But temptation waylaid him from another direction : the success of *Pather Pāñchālī* induced him even to act as the executioner of his own creation and incarcerate that flawless novel in a long trail of sequels. The boy-hero Apu grows up and comes to Calcutta where he is as much lost as his author. Love and death, poverty and suffering are all there, but the magic is gone and the glory departed ; instead of being an inhabitant of the universe, Apu now is merely a country cousin. The magic is somewhat recaptured in the jungle scenes in the last volume, for Bibhutibhushan's love of Nature extends right up to the dark heart of the jungle, and there again we share with him a sense of release, a deliverance from the labours of realism to the reality itself. It is true that this feeling is no longer continuous ; but anyhow, *Pather Pāñchālī* has survived its sequels, and been equalled in effect by certain short stories where the author takes us to the same sweet world of innocence.

Altogether of another is Annandasankar, urbane, highly sophisticated, 'European'. One of the important 'influences' in his work is England, where he spent a part of his student days and wrote his first book, his dazzled and dazzling travel-diary of Europe. Often in his fiction, rather oftener than Pramatha Chaudhuri's, the scene is laid in England and the characters, oftener women than men, are European. Inoculating him against Saratchandra's influence, this European inclination has been balanced by a number of other interests : his more than academic pre-occupation with Vaishnavism and the Gandhian way, his deep absorption in Rabindranath and passion for the jongleurs of old Bengal. The result is that his vision is large and his work varied than those of his contemporary novelists who have relied exclusively on the fact of one's being alive and able to move about, mistaking that for experience. Annadasankar, knowing that merely being alive is not enough, and life means only what one can make it to, has sought mastery over his material instead of remaining its passive agent. That is why the primrose path of youthful promise has not, in his case, led to a blind alley ; we find in him no waste or blasted hopes, but a completed course, at least an autumnal fruition of spring flowers, which, as we have seen, is by no means inevitable with Bengali authors.

Annadasankar's fiction falls easily into two divisions : his one novel in six thick volumes, and his novelettes and short stories. Taking the whole together, I note, first, that there is not a page in this not negligible bulk which lacks that quality of prose I have already referred to ; and second, that the singular virtue of this fiction is a great gaiety, a brilliant liveliness as of a flame tossed by the wind. Annadasankar is European also in his greater inability to portray the actively good as attractive ; for his witty and even naughty passages are more memorable than his pensive ones, and those whom he laughs at in the six crowded volumes generally interest us more than those whom he admires. His short novels and more so his short stories, admirably illustrate that lightheartedness can be compatible with seriousness of purpose, and lightness of structure does not necessarily mean slightness of texture. The gift of laughter is his, but he is seldom extravagant in its use, and is

able, in some at least of his exquisitely proportioned short stories, to consummate it in tears. Throughout in his fiction, moreover, there is, as in his verse, a most happy mingling of wit and poetry, and though wit, in this case, is the more prominent partner, it is so tempered by poetry as to stop short, except here and there, just on the frontiers of the comic.

IX

It is curious that in Bengal we do not have a tradition of comic writing ; and though Rabindranath is great in humour, and of those mentioned here most have a goodly measure of it, there is in our serious literature hardly a large-scale humorist or an outstanding comic creation. Humour in our literature is 'underground', somewhat like Chaucer's, or better still, Lamb's harmonized with other ingredients, a part contributing to the whole. When it comes to the surface, it is either with the point and glitter of wit, as in Prāmātha Chaudhuri and Annadasankar, or with the ferment of satire, as in Kaliprasanna Sinha and the comedies of Dinabandhu Mitra and Madhusudan Datta, or in the form of a frothy garrulousness, as in that grand old gossip, at the moment our oldest living writer, Kedarnath Bandyopadhyay. Another writer in advanced years, and a most remarkable figure in our literature, is Rajsekhar Bose, whose work, first appearing under the pseudonym of 'Parasuram', is the nearest approximation in our language to comic writing as understood in England. An extremely sedate gentleman in personal life, Rajsekhar Bose effects the rare combination of the savant and the artist ; he is as much interested in word-science as in word-art, as much in applied chemistry as in Sanskrit classics, being the author of the first and as yet unseconded dictionary of spoken Bengali and little tracts on mineralogy and dyeing, as well as the translator of *Meghadūtām* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.^{*} His dictionary, terse and to the point, has the additional advantage of being the only

^{*} At the moment of my writing, he is engaged in a translation of the *Mahābhārata*.

of our language which one can use without the strain of physical exercise ; his translations, done in honest homely prose, are not only readable, but at least in the case of the *Rāmāyana*, an authentic presentation of the spirit of the original.

But it is as a humorist that he is best known. His comic sketches are solidly built on satire, but the satire is gentle, without bitterness, indignation or utopian fury, so that his humour is never wanting in that more human quality of good humour, and those whom he laughs at readily laughs with him. An excellent common sense causes the mirth ; the rollicking lines are implicit judgments on character and situation, sound, though far from severe. His style is superbly plain, with just a hint of the mock-heroic, just the shadow of an occasional wink ; and knowing that dramatic exaggeration is inescapable in satire, he takes good care to avoid the excesses of enthusiasm, maintaining in his manner a business-like reserve, thus guarding himself against the usual vulgarities of the professional humorist.

It has often occurred to me that prevalent public taste determines the forms of literary composition ; that a writer, though free to choose his content, must, in order to have any readers at all, put it in a form at least moderately in vogue. I find some instances of this in the Bengali literary scene. Our public seems able to relish surface humour only when connected with satire, and tales of adventure only on the level of Jules Verne. Both adventure and innocuous humour have, for some strange reason, been relegated entirely to juvenile literature. This, I cannot help feeling, has resulted in two serious injuries : Premendra Mitra, completely equipped for writing adult tales of adventure, or romances, as they used to be called, had never had the chance of writing one ; and Sivaram Chakravarty, gifted with an irrepressible and often irresistible humour, has, after a long struggle, finally submitted himself to the awkward position of a writer for children only. Sivaram, as the best of his children's stories declare, has it in him to write in the best manner of W. W. Jacobs, but the limitations imposed by his school-going public being insurmountable, his potentialities have been stifled and even mutilated to a positively painful degree.

If Bengal's adult readership, or even a small section of it, had demanded romances and satire-free humour, Premendra and Sivaram could have exercised their faculties more freely, and our literature been so much the richer. The greater is the pity in Sivaram's case, for he could develop into precisely that type of 'pure' humorist of which we have not yet a single one.*

We must deplore Sivaram's losses—for they are as much ours—but should pause a moment to add that in Bengal children's literature enjoys an extraordinary, indeed an enviable position, for our literature, historically young, has not yet been too highly specialised, and some of our best minds have laboured for children, whether from a sense of duty, or for the fun of it. Isvarchandra Vidyasagar wrote the first text-books—his penny-book of alphabet is still unsurpassed—and though Rabindranath's more formal text-books have, unfortunately, passed into desuetude, his Primer, a little masterpiece of old age, has become as much a classic as the varied work in verse and prose which, in different periods of his life, he wrote to delight a son, a group of nephews or a granddaughter, illustrating them, in the closing years, with his own hand. Yet Rabindranath himself has not been able to demode (and he would certainly not have wished it) the perennial series of Jogindranath Sarkar, a collector of nursery rhymes, a lifelong and tireless writer for children, for children alone, and specially those who

* That the 'market' is a decisive factor in the production of literature can also be seen in the comparative leanness of *belles-lettres* in Bengali. Though the language is ripe for this form, and our writers have a natural inclination for it, there have been of late only a few notable biographies, memoirs or travel-books, and there is not a single living writer whose activities are confined to this branch of literature. Curiously enough, *belles-lettres* thrived better in our nineteenth century; our eminent Victorians, specially those who were not professional writers, were rather good at writing autobiographies and memoirs. The rise of fiction changed public taste; professional writers used up autobiographical material in novels, and those unable to write a novel found it increasingly hard to compete. Fiction still dominates, and today our market for *belles-lettres* is proportionately much smaller than it was in the nineteenth century. The situation is comparable to the rich profusion of *belles-lettres* in England in the eighteenth century and its sharp decline in the fiction-flooded nineteenth.

have only just, or have not yet, learnt to read, for his gladsome *Hāsikhuśi* is on the lips of children nearly as soon as they are able to babble. Jogindranath, though not a writer in the strictly technical sense, or because of that, is marvellously child-like. lisp-ing and inconsequential, so that several of his books, more play than reading matter, and now in the third generation of currency, have ceased to be books and become an institution. The last part of this remark is also true of the work of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar who, in his series of *Grandmother's Packets*, has preserved for our children and ourselves those Bengali versions of universal fairy-tales which, but for his labours, would by now probably have passed on to limbo : preserved, what is more, not only the tales themselves, but the very voice of the generations of grand-mothers who, in the past, had crooned them in dim half-light to small, drowsy, insatiable listeners.

I have felt that a children's book cannot become a work of art except through a process of subtle alchemy that so changes its inner nature as to make it not only a book for all ages, but really more for age than youth, for only a fully matured person can realise the full significance of *The Ugly Duckling* or *Alice in Wonderland* or Rabindranath's *Sé* ('He'), that amusing and profound fantasia of the Self. Others besides Rabindranath have, happily, written like this in Bengali, appealing to children on the surface level and to adults on a higher ; and of these, two must be mentioned here, Abanindranath Tagore and Sukumar Ray, the former more on the adult level, and the latter more on the child's.

Abanindranath, our painter-author, combining a painter's eye with a poet's ear, writes an exquisite, rhythmic, technicolor prose ; he is abundant in poetry and wily in humour ; he warms the cold print with the timbre of a born story-teller, transmitting the very accents of his speech, thus becoming, without intending it, of course, in a sense more *Pramathean* than *Pramatha Chaudhuri*. Those who have heard Abanindranath speak, or better still, dictate his recent autobiographies, must marvel at the close resemblance his earlier and more 'literary' work bears to his speech ; it is, in fact, this inimitable and unadaptable style which marks his entire wordman-

ship, from the Bageswari lectures on aesthetics, where the artist is manifestly uncomfortable in academic robes, to his recent little *Manual of Drawing*, which, perhaps, is less a work on Art than a work of art.

In his children's tales, naturally, Abanindranath transcends his audience, and we should not be surprised if the 'normal' child finds him at times a little boring. More adhering to the child's norm is Sukumar Ray, whose family for some time nearly held a monopoly of children's literature in Bengal, for his father, a pioneer in it, was followed up by at least one uncle and a sister no less remarkable. The most gifted in a gifted family, Sukumar Ray is more versatile Lewis Carroll, being his own John Tenniel, and also more productive, though cut short by a premature death. It matters little if his school-stories—darlings of my own boyhood—have somewhat dated, for he is not only the begetter, but so far the ablest practitioner, of that branch of writing which G. K. Chesterton thought glorious : I mean nonsense. Though his imitators, inevitably numerous, have produced nonsense in an altogether different sense a niece of his, Lila Majumdar, has given out the Rayean spark in the form of a wayward jollity, expressed with the verve of wholesome schoolboy-slang. Moreover, in the years following Sukumar Ray's death, our children's literature has gained vastly from other sources : many of the living authors mentioned here also write for children, some profusely ; and two others, Hemendrakumar Ray in 'thrillers' and Sunirmal Bose in trilling rhymes, are, like Sivaram Chakravarty, exclusive and prolific child-charmers. So far, so good ; but new and unwelcome tendencies came on the trail of the Second World War ; a glut of children's books, frankly commercial and commercialized, now threatens to suppress those of genuine literary value. Applying to this context what I have observed above about the inter-relation of literary forms and prevalent public taste, or the 'market', it would only be reasonable to surmise that, if commercialization gains ground, as one fears it will, a time will soon come when the situation will be similar to that in contemporary England, where no serious author writes for children (unless, like the early de la Mare, he simply cannot help it or, like Eliot of the

Cats, seeks to divert himself), and children's books are relegated almost entirely to amateurs. We can only hope that our amateurs, outgrowing the illiteracy we have just sampled, will, in course of time, become as accomplished as their English counterpart.

X

Two, after Rajsekhar Bose, appear to have earned the title of humorist : Pramathanath Bisi and the writer who calls himself 'Banaphul'. A trenchant wielder of words, Pramathanath Bisi has a genuine sense of humour which he too frequently indulges in, dissipating a great part of it in fatuousness. Though he spent his adolescence at the Santiniketan school, and under Rabindranath's personal influence, he seems never to have been affected by the Master's 'even air', displaying in his work an energetic obstreperousness, a rough, muscular turbulence. This, perhaps congenital, may have been aggravated by his having taken it into his head that he is a writer of the same order as Bernard Shaw, and has, therefore, a right to bully and bluster ; to preface a book with a terrific sentence like 'most readers are fools', and proceed in the same downright manner with his crusade against that class of humanity with whom he identifies the majority of his readers. A facile and competent writer in various forms, he seems, except in his lyric verse where he allows himself a few lovely moments of repose, generally rather out of breath, and to be talking at the top of his voice, at times also with his fists clenched. His humour, naturally, is heavy and turgid, contrasting well with the light pleasantries of 'Banaphul'. a prolific and popular writer of fiction, specializing in little amusing anecdotes, one of which one can finish between one sip of tea and another. It is notable, however, that both have a definite flair for the drama : 'Banaphul's' two biographical plays and Pramathanath Bisi's satires being among the most *readable* plays written after Rabindranath. The italics mean that, unlike many of our stage-plays, they are both readable and actable ; but the professional theatre has performed Pramathanath Bisi only

once and 'Banaphul' not at all, though it was only after the publication of his *Sri Madhusudan* that two different plays based on the tragic life of the poet were running simultaneously in two Calcutta theatres.

Yet another instance of the influence of public demand on literary forms is provided by the poverty of Bengali dramatic writing at the present time. The Bengali stage, with its great actors and useful actor-playwrights,* has a remarkable history ; for not only is Calcutta the only city in India where there are professional, permanent, year-round theatres, but Bengali, moreover, is the only Indian language in which plays in the modern sense have been written. Play-writing, in our nineteenth century, was very much the vogue ; and Rabindranath, whose juvenilia includes several dramatic poems of considerable length, never abandoned the drama throughout the busier years of maturity. But in our own times the vogue has lamentably declined, so much so that, though two of Tarasankar's stories have been dramatized and performed, and both Sailajananda and Premendra Mitra have 'gone over' to the films, not one of the authors mentioned so far either writes for the stage or has published more than a relatively slender body of dramatic writing.

* The last of these was Jogeschandra Chaudhuri, with whose *Sitrā* Sisirkumar Bhaduri burst into fame, and whose plays, along with Saratchandra's, formed the staple part of the Bhaduri repertoire. It is well worth remarking here that, if Sisirkumar did not insist on one-man plays, and had a wider range of emotional and intellectual sympathy, he could have changed the history of our theatre. As it happened, however, his temperament limited him to only one type of drama ; he could never be comfortable with Rabindranath, and was not interested in the new literature of his language. It is highly significant that, though his ascendancy exactly synchronized with the appearance of the Kallioleas, in whom he excited a tremendous admiration, overflowing into one of Achintyakumar Sengupta's happiest lyrics, he was not able to attract a single young writer to the playwright's craft, and the theatre, under his sovereignty, remained as far from living literature as before. Our enthusiasms of the late twenties were deceptive ; for it is by now clear that Sisirkumar is great only by himself, and not as an influence ; only a great actor, but neither a liberator of our theatre nor a regenerator of our drama. Indeed, our theatre has been singularly unfortunate, for Sisirkumar failed where Rabindranath did not, and outside these two, there was none equal to the task.

The reason for this is clear. Before Rabindranath, co-operation between the author and the stage was easy, our literature and our theatre being on the same nascent (or renascent) level. Since Rabindranath's ascendancy, however, there has been an increasing hiatus between the two ; literature has grown more and more subtle and daring whereas the theatre has remained crude and conventional, depending much on players and little on playwrights, drawing audiences with actors, actresses, sets, costumes, songs, but seldom with play itself. No more than a bare half-dozen times have our commercial theatres produced Rabindranath ; and although one of his social comedies has been an astounding success, even in the commercial sense, and a little tragic play, beautiful and heart-breaking, also a success in every sense except the commercial, the others, dismal travesties, have deservingly flopped. Our stage has a Tagore-fright which it takes no trouble to conceal, and would sooner plunge headlong into the Ganga than think of touching any of his symbolical dramas. Rabindranath, if he had not had the chance of getting his plays performed by his own troupe, first the talented tribe of Jorasanko (himself included), and then his Santiniketan pupils, could not or would not have written the plays he did ;* and Saratchandra, though an idol of the theatres, had the least to do with them ; for he not only did not take the trouble of writing a single straight-forward play, but consistently avoided that of adapting his stories for the stage.

Some of our modern writers, when young, were marked for their dramatic leanings ; they wrote quite creditable one-act plays and flirted with the theatre, but their suit being rejected beyond hope, returned to fiction with a greater earnestness. One cannot

* I never cease to regret that Rabindranath, with his unequalled resources, had never thought of establishing his own theatre in Calcutta. A Tagore theatre, running regularly in the metropolis, would have created a new dramatic tradition and served, like the Dublin Abbey Theatre, to unite the stage and serious literature. His strict adherence to the amateur status, so far as his dramatic productions were concerned, has, apart from other things, left his own plays to a somewhat uncertain fate ; there is no guarantee now that, as time passes, they will not be produced merely amateurishly, or, outside Santiniketan, be produced at all.

write plays, at any rate continue to write them, unless one is or can reasonably hope to be produced ; a drama cannot exist without a corresponding theatre. Today our literature and our theatre are wider apart than ever ; much of what happens and is spoken on the stage would strike an author as simply barbarous, and co-operation is out of the question. Two, however, of our literary notables, Sachindranath Sengupta and Manmatha Ray, are inalienable writers for the stage, such as it is : they have accepted the conditions ; the crudeness and vulgarity and violence ; and, not being geniuses like Marlowe or Shakespeare, have, instead of transcending those conditions, themselves become victims. Theirs is a laudable martyrdom, and ours a sigh of regret. No doubt, if our theatre had even roughly corresponded to our literature, these would have written much better plays, and younger writers have been encouraged to emulate them. As it is, a play is about the last thing a new writer today would think of labouring on.

XI

Our literature, so far, is at its best in poetry and the short story ; the novel is comparatively weak ; our writers of fiction, including Rabindranath and Saratchandra, are surer masters of the short story which, at times, goes by the name of novel, being long enough to make a small book by itself. Significantly, our relatively later writers of fiction are mainly and mostly story-writers, the only exception being Narayan Gangopadhyay, fancied by the public as Tarasankar's second. Here, again, we discern the greater merit of the short story, whether in the taut compression of Subodh Ghosh, or the gentle wistfulness of Kamakshiprasad Chattopadhyay, or the blunt vigour of Jyotirmoy Roy. Subodh Ghosh, with his quick tempo and staccato rhythm, has a distinctive style ; he is both bold and refined, and rather resembles Pramatha Chaudhuri in his love for strange places and faces. With this difference, however, that Pramatha Chaudhuri's places are out of the way, and Subodh Ghosh's outlandish ; the latter's lunatics and scoundrels

are by no means lovable like the former's ; and instead of the Pramathean tolerance or the almost uncanny detachment of Sailajanda, we have in this writer a marked inclination to use his stories as illustrations of theories. Despite this weakness, Subodh Ghosh has treated unusual subjects with more than usual success and only a moderate parading of his knowledge of physiology, polo and manganese ore. Exquisitely his opposite is Protiva Bose, who writes about the most common subjects in the language of common speech, obtaining uncommon results. Protiva Bose knows no other world than that of a stay-at-home Bengali woman, a world which many of her own sex disdain as narrow and dull, but she finds and makes absorbing, rich in psychological variety and dramatic conflict. Her stories are all about love, woman's love for man, and as a woman sees it ; her style is simple and warm ; and her dialogues are so natural that we seem actually to hear the living voices. This close sense of reality induces her often to write in the first person, the 'I' being the heroine herself ; and she gets round the usual dangers of this method not by any conscious effort, but simply through her complete lack of interest in anything except the story, which she never interrupts, and seems, at times, in too great a hurry to tell. Happily, this writer is free from both Saratchandra's domesticity and the Kallolean revolt against it ; love, in her stories, is both shy and ardent, both quiet and daring ; an advantage, I think, derived from the fact of her being a woman.

Protiva Bose's great merit seems to be that she is quite content to be a woman, and never tries to write like a man. This remark is worth making, for in Bengal to this day, as was the case in the Europe of George Eliot and George Sand, women who write books (or even read them) are often ashamed of their sex, and anxious to make up for this deficiency by imitating masculine manners. A typical example is Ashapura Devi, an alert and intelligent writer, who spares herself no pains to appear a man in nearly every story she writes, assuming, when writing in the first person, the character of not only a man, but a man of the world. She indulges freely in men's jokes about women, often effecting extremely faithful imitations of Sivaram Chakravarty, whom she

pretends to laugh at. Younger in years, but more ambitious, is Bani Roy who, apart from being gifted in verse, writes striking stories of jealousy and despair. of the flowering and withering of youth. Her frailty, however, is her learning, or rather her consciousness of it, for though her acquaintance with Greek tragedy has brought a new atmosphere to her work, she still loads it with too many quotations and allusions, sometimes sacrificing sincerity to a certain literary hauteur. I say still, for she may out-grow it yet.

XII

Bengal, said Edward Thompson, is a land made for poetry. He was right. From the literary point of view, Bengal's natural resources are great, and if achievement has not been in proportion to potentialities, the cause must ultimately be traced to the total political eclipse from which we have only just emerged. The coming of the British, as I have observed in the first section of this chapter, timed the Bengal Renaissance ; but the bacchanalian flush of Madhusudan Datta was soon over, and in the bleak morning-after that followed, our writers felt that they must render some service to their country, apart from the signal one of writing good books. Patriotic writing inevitably abounded ; and to this day it is considered the duty of a writer to be conspicuously and vocally a patriot.* No patriotism, as T. S. Eliot has rightly remarked in his essay on Kipling, is not a fit subject for poetry ; and what happens to a professedly patriotic writer, when he belongs to a free and powerful country, is most convincingly demonstrated by Eliot's occasion for the remark. Patriotism can be bearable only when the writer's country suffers, either chronically through foreign domination, or temporarily through wars or revolutions, though even then

* One of the grounds for the public arraignment of the young Kallioleians was that their work was useless, since it did not help to make India free. This, at least, had disarming naïveté, but in more recent times the same trend of thought has reappeared in an insidious form, being clothed in the pretentious language of political schools.

the motherland is as delicate and dangerous a subject as the mother, both tending to produce, as proved by Cowper's filial piety and Rupert Brooke's England-mindedness, excellent school-book pieces. Only two countries in recent history, Bengal and Ireland,* thanks (thanks indeed !) to their long and apparently unmitigable suffering, have produced such literature as is at once patriotic and good art (*The Countess Cathleen*, for instance, or Rabindranath's *swadeshi* songs) : good, because it transcends patriotism and becomes religious.

All the same, the fact of our political bondage has no doubt considerably retarded our literary development. Political servitude is spiritually as harmful as it is materially disastrous, for it engenders and encourages such notorious mental vices as sloth, self-pity and that special form of swagger known as inferiority-complex. Consequently, there is much in our literature in the strain of *Rule Britannia* and *My Mother*, much of swash-buckling-sentimental-schoolboyish effusion ; our writers, in their zeal to serve their country, have often said good-bye to both sense and sensibility. Such, indeed, has been the tendency to over-emphasize, to exaggerate, to proclaim before the world the enormity of our suffering and the greatness of our qualities that it was even possible for one of our older poets to assert that in no other country did the mother love her child as much as in his own, and, with a more reckless defiance of logic, apostrophize India as the mother of Mother Earth. ('Earth was sanctified by touching your feet, O India !' so, actually, goes a

* Ireland, it must be added, is supreme in this respect, both in quantity and quality ; for, apart from Swift's fury, the 'minor' but memorable poetry of James Clarence Mangan, and apart, also, from the enchantment of the Celtic Revival, there is the whole of Yeats who, him-self outliving and outgrowing the movement, mythologized its founders and participants, made legends of his friends and of Ireland a vision. And in this he has no equal, in this total rejection of all that is collective and general in the feeling commonly called patriotism, and in this unrelenting power to transform it to a *personal* passion, a singularity of his own self. Yeats alone - for even Shakespeare, in his historical plays, succumbed to spasms of chauvinism, and even Rabindranath nodded - Yeats alone among the world's poets has been able repeatedly to talk about his country, its ancient and recent history, and at the same time invariably produce pure, utter, eternalized poetry. For him, no praise is praise enough.

line.) These delirious extravagances would have been unnecessary if we were free. If we were free, Rabindranath, not to speak of others, need not have wasted his time in writing that interminably quoted and recited exhortation where he pleads guilty of fiddling while Rome is burning, and desires to be 'recalled' from his 'truant' vocation of poetry. This, I think, is Rabindranath's single serious lapse, but others' integrity being far less unassailable, our political misfortunes have, on the whole, caused irreparable losses in our literary man-power. The last decade, with its all-over wars and revolutions and an appalling famine at home, has been the worst ; the reporting of day to-day events has increasingly been considered a part of the writer's offices ; literature confused with journalism, and art with political activity. The result, the infinitely regrettable result, is that the books of the majority of the newer writers, as well as the recent ones of some of the celebrated elders, are made mostly of newspaper-stuff, descriptions of latest events and comments on current topics, dressed up, now flashily and now shabbily, as fiction or verse. A story takes off beautifully only to crash on patriotic platitudes : a young poetic aspirant, eschewing such paraphernalia of his craft as flowers and coiffures, replaces them by bayonets and dustbins, but sinks into a more abysmal sentimentalism than that which he professes to despise ; an unreadable novel is extolled by the distinguished simply because it swears allegiance to a particular political creed. Anarchy has been bitter in Bengal, sanity sabotaged, and dark, now, with confusion is our literary scene.... But Time, the inscrutable scene-shifter, is tirelessly at work, and history teaches us to hope that the blight will soon be over. Specially now that our political freedom has been attained, there is every reason to look forward to a time when our literature, released from the obligations of public service, freed from froth, cured of sobs and bravado, will become adult, fully mature. The soil is rich, the waters are sweet, and the seed of Rabindranath cannot have been cast vain.
